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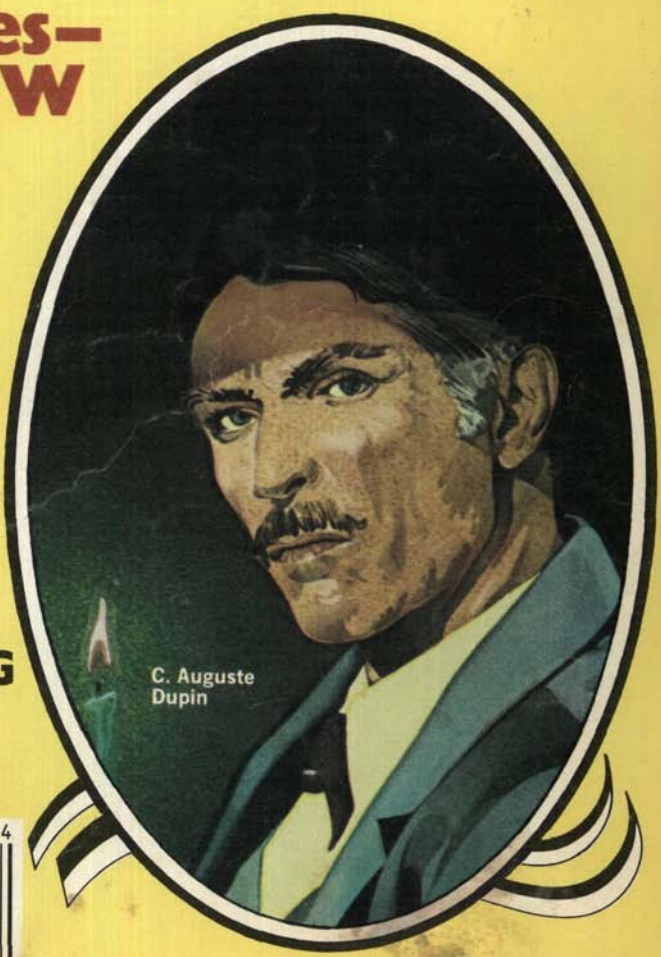

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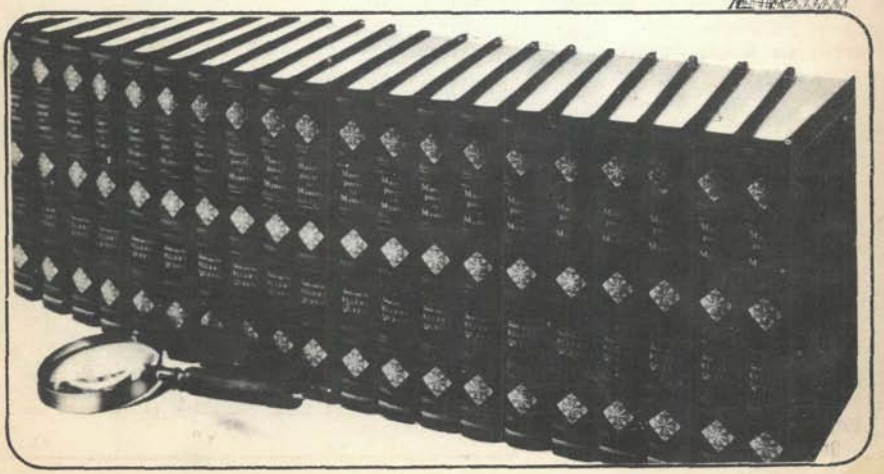

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THE MAN AT THE BOTTOM

by *MICHAEL GILBERT*

Mercer rolled over in bed, yawned, pulled himself up onto his elbows, and said, "I could do with a cup of char. Strong with sugar and no milk."

The girl who was lying beside him sat up. She wore a watch on a plaited gold strap on her left wrist and a small gold cross on a chain round her neck.

She looked down at the watch and said, "See, sluggard, it is eleven o'clock. That is not the right hour for getting up in the morning."

"I always have a lie-in on Sundays."

"It is not Sunday. It is Thursday."

"To me all days are Sundays."

"You are a great lazy hog! Also you are covered with bristles

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like a hog. You shall shave off your bristles and I will make tea for both of us."

"Okay. That's a bargain," said Mercer. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood up. "My God, I've got a head like a buzz-saw and a mouth like the bottom of a hen coop."

"That is because you drink too much."

"If I didn't drink, I'd die of boredom."

"Then you should get work. Real work."

Mercer said, "Ugh," and went into the tiny bathroom which opened off the bedroom. Over his shoulder he said, "Sometimes you talk sense, Shallini. But mostly you talk drivel."

The girl, busy with the electric kettle, said, "Pig," without rancor.

"Work," said Mercer, turning on the tap, "is something you do when you need money. People who work when they don't need money are wasting the one life God gave them. Or maybe work has become a drug which they can't leave alone."

He inspected his face in the glass. It was a relief map, seamed with the ravines and crevices dug by experience. The deep pits under his eyes were bruise-colored. The highlands of his cheeks were a mottled red. He said, "You're an ugly buzzard."

"What did you say?"

"I was talking to myself. Get on with that tea."

Five minutes later he was back in bed.

The girl ran a finger down his cheek and said, "That is better. Now it is nice and smooth." Her finger checked for a moment. "You promised you would tell me how you got that scar."

"It's a long story. And not very interesting. This tea's too hot to drink."

"Of course it's hot. You do not make tea with lukewarm water."

"I saw Nahmal yesterday. She looked worried."

Shallini was used by now to Mercer's sudden switches of conversation. She said, "If you were Nahmal, you would be worried."

"Why? Tell me."

"Nahmal has a very complicated life."

"You mean she's running two men."

"She is not running two men. And that is a very coarse way of expressing it."

"Sorry. Go on."

"Why are you interested in Nahmal? You should be interested only in me."

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"I'm capable of being interested in more than one thing at a time." He found the tea was cool enough for a cautious sip. "Tell me about her complicated life."

"Well, she is going with Mr. Parker. You know him?" Mercer shook his head. "He works now for the Arnold Rowe Company. You have heard of Mr. Rowe, surely."

"They are ships' chandlers. Right? With offices and a big yard and store in Lower Creek Street."

"That is right. Mr. Parker is in charge of Mr. Rowe's office. He used to be an officer on one of the ships. I think perhaps it was the *Tamar*."

"If it's the *Tamar* it brings in timber from Scandinavia. Takes out electronic machinery, computers, adding machines. Things like that."

"When Mr. Parker was First Officer it did not only bring in timber. It brought in other things, hidden inside the timber."

"What sort of things?"

"Dirty things. Things like you keep in those parcels." She nodded at the cupboard in the far corner of the room. Mercer jerked upright in bed, spilling some of the tea as he did so. He put the cup down on the bedside table and looked at the girl who put down the cup she was holding and placed both her hands on Mercer's bare forearm.

"Have I said something which displeases you?"

"It's not what you bloody said. It's what you've been bloody doing. Who told you to search my belongings?"

"I did not search them. Please. I keep things of my own in that cupboard. One of the packets was open. I happened to look. Some of the pictures are so very peculiar. I did not like them at all."

Mercer relaxed slowly. He released his arm from her grip and slid it behind her shoulders. He said, "I like you, Shallini. I like you very much. But little girls who look at things they're not meant to see get their bottoms smacked. You understand?"

"I shall not look at them again, I promise you. I did not think they were at all attractive."

"Go on telling me about Parker. You say he used to bring in pictures and books like that."

"Yes. They were hidden right inside one of the big pieces."

"In one of the baulks of timber."

"Yes. It had been hollowed out. It was done very cleverly. No one could suspect. He made a number of trips and much money.

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Then someone—I think it would have been Mr. Rowe—I think he found out."

"Arnold Rowe. Fat man always smoking a big cigar. I guess he's on the fiddle himself. What did he do?"

"He gave Mr. Parker a post in his warehouse. Now Mr. Parker does not sail in the ships himself. He arranges for other people to do it."

"Sounds a cushy sort of job. Why did you say it was complicated?"

"It is not the job. It is Nahmal."

"Ah," said Mercer, "I guessed the complication would be female. What has Nahmal been up to?"

"I told you. She is going with Mr. Parker."

"Lucky Mr. Parker. A shore berth and an attractive girl. Where does the complication come in?"

"The complication is Ramesh Chatto Baba."

"And who the hell is he?"

"He is a steward. On that same ship. The *Tamar*. He was Nahmal's friend. Oh, for some time now. He had promised to marry her. It is Mr. Parker who arranges the cabin crews on the boats, you see. So he arranges for Ramesh to be much away. As soon as one trip is finished he finds him another job."

Mercer started to laugh. He said, "What a lovely setup! He sends the boy friend away on a trip so that he can be with his girl. What's he got to worry about? Surely he can handle a cabin steward."

"Ramesh is not an ordinary steward. Before he came here he was in a circus."

Mercer seemed to have lost interest in Nahmal and Ramesh. He said, "I'd like to meet this chap Parker. I fancy we might have something to talk about. Nahmal should be able to fix it for me. Shouldn't she?"

The prospect of something to do seemed to have put life into him.

"We'll do it now." He padded across to the window and looked out. "Only thing is, we'll have to shake off Weary Willie first."

"Who are you talking about?"

"That bald man in the car. He's been hanging round here on and off for days."

"You mean he is watching us?"

"I don't think he's just admiring the view," said Mercer.

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When they had both dressed they went out—Shallini to find Nahmal at the hairdresser's where she worked, Mercer to annoy the bald man in the car. They came out of their front door at the same moment. The girl turned to the left, and Mercer, according to plan, switched to the right. The bald man got out of the car, lit a cigarette with elaborate casualness, and allowed Mercer to reach the corner of the street before he started after him. Mercer, as soon as he was round the corner, started to run with great lolloping strides which took him along surprisingly fast. Timing it to a nicety, he reached and slipped into the mouth of an alleyway as the bald man turned the corner.

Clearly he had expected to see Mercer 20 yards ahead of him. When he saw nothing but a Jamaican sweeping the pavement and an old lady being towed along by a small dog, he hesitated. Finally he made up his mind to advance. Mercer retreated down the alley which led, he knew, into a cross alley and so back by a circular route to the High Street.

Ten minutes later he was sitting in the café where he had arranged to meet Shallini. He was wondering abut the bald man who made the elementary mistake of allowing his quarry to get too far ahead of him; but the bald man could not really be faulted for this. To keep trailing a suspicious quarry you needed an experienced team of three or four people.

Mercer was drinking his second cup of coffee when Shallini arrived. She said, "Nahmal will speak to Mr. Parker. He is not in his office this morning. She thinks he could see you this evening. The best time would be about six o'clock, just before the office closes. She wanted to know what you wished to talk to him about."

"But you didn't tell her."

"I did not tell her, stupid one, because I did not know."

"That's right," said Mercer. "You didn't know."

Lower Creek Street is a long winding thoroughfare which ends in a wall. An opening in the wall gives onto a flight of steps which in turn takes you down to the waters of the Lower Creek. Unless you have a boat you can then go no farther. All the buildings on the north side of the street are connected, in one way or another, with the river and its trade.

The last three buildings before the wall are a barge repair yard, once prosperous but now becoming derelict as the barge trade de-

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clined; the store yard and offices of Messrs. Arnold Rowe and Company (Ships' Chandlers and Marine Contractors); and the premises of the Marine and Waterside Employment Agency occupying the end house and overlooking the point where the Lower Creek ran out into the Thames.

At six o'clock Mercer was sitting in an office on the first floor of the middle of these three buildings, talking to Mr. Parker, a tall tough red-faced man of about Mercer's age, who looked more like a soldier than a sailor.

They had reached a degree of cautious understanding.

Parker said, "It's quite true. And since the girls seem to have been talking out of school"—Shallini and Nahmal looked at each other guiltily—"and since it's all over and done with long ago, I've no objection to telling you. It was a good little racket while it lasted. You buy the stuff wholesale in Copenhagen. Books, photographs, films, the lot. We had a very safe way of bringing it in—I expect you were told about that, too."

Mercer nodded. He was staring out of the window at the river and seemed to have only half of his mind on what was being said.

"There was five hundred percent profit in it at least. You had to spread it around a bit among the people who helped you. But it added up to a good tax-free bonus at the end of the year."

"Why did you drop it?"

Parker hesitated. Then he said, "Difficulties were beginning to crop up at the sales end. I thought it was time to get out."

Not the whole truth, thought Mercer; I wonder what really happened. He said, "The distribution was just the part I might have been able to help with. I've got a number of contacts in the Soho area. The water guard has been so bloody officious lately that their supplies are beginning to dry up."

"Terrible to think of their customers drooling with unspeakable fantasies and nothing to feed them on," said Parker. "Me, I never saw anything in that sort of stuff at all. What's the point of pictures when you've got the real thing?" He smiled at Nahmal who smiled back. "All the same, I have still got one or two contacts in the shipping business. They might be interested, particularly if you can guarantee the buying end. I'll ask around. Look in tomorrow night at the China Clipper. We've got a private room at the back that we use most evenings. Come about nine o'clock."

When Mercer got outside, a car was drawn up by the curb. The bald man was standing beside it. He came across and blocked

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Mercer's path. Mercer said, "What's this? A mugging?" He seemed not at all alarmed.

The bald man said, "I'm Detective Sergeant Russ. I've been instructed to take you to Balfour Street Police Station."

"I'm quite sure Superintendent Browning didn't say that. He knows the ropes, even if you don't. What he said was, you were to ask me to accompany you to the Station. Right?"

"I'm prepared to show you my warrant card if you require to see it."

"That's much better. No, I won't ask to look at your warrant card. I guessed you were a policeman. You're so bloody bad at following people."

Russ opened the door of his car without another word.

Superintendent Browning was a hard man, in charge of a hard Division. His superiors, while disapproving of some of his methods, approved of the results. Chief Superintendent Morrissey had summed him up when he was in charge of Number 1 District. "If Bull Browning 'ad as much up top as he's got down bottom 'ed end up Commissioner."

Browning came straight to the point. He said, "I know all about you, Mercer. I want you out of my manor and I want you out quick."

Mercer said, "Oh," in a tone which might have meant anything or nothing.

"Another thing. You've been greasing up to Parker. I don't know what your game is, but Parker's boss wouldn't be happy about you having anything to do with him."

"Parker's boss is Arnold Rowe. What's he got that lets him give orders to the police?"

"No one gives me orders." The Superintendent's face began to color. "Mr. Rowe is a Councillor and a respected citizen. If he asks me to pass a request, I pass it on."

"All right," said Mercer equably. "You've passed it on. What next?"

"Are you going to be sensible? Or are you looking for trouble?"

Mercer said, "Twenty years ago, when you were on a beat, the boys used to call you Bull Browning. Because bull was the only thing you understood. Your badge was polished daily with Brasso and your toecaps shone."

"You—"

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"And if you'll excuse me saying so, you don't seem to have learned much in the years between."

"I'll show you whether I've learned anything," roared Bull Browning, jumping up. His forehead and cheeks were engorged with blood. So loudly had he shouted that Russ, who must have been waiting outside, opened the door and came in. Mercer, who had been leaning back in his chair, had not moved an inch. There was something formidable in his immobility. For a long moment Browning, erect behind his desk, stared down at him. His face was gradually resuming its normal color.

"All right," he said at last. "I've warned you. I won't warn you again. Take him away."

"If that man lays a hand on me, you'll both be in trouble," said Mercer, climbing to his feet. Russ held the door open and Mercer went out quietly.

The room which led off the half landing at the back of the China Clipper had nothing on the door to indicate it was available to the public. When Mercer was shown into it by the landlord shortly after nine o'clock that evening he found Nahmal, Parker, and another man there, with a bottle of whiskey, a soda-water siphon, and three glasses on the table. There was a coal fire alight in the small grate. A framed notice over the fireplace said: Trust Yourself. If You Don't, Who Will?

The second man looked like Winston Churchill, but inflated several pounds per square inch in every visible aspect. He was smoking one of the longest cigars Mercer had ever seen.

Parker filled the third glass half full with whiskey and pushed it across the table. He said, "Add your own soda. It's all on our friend. Arnold Rowe. Bill Mercer."

"Pleased to meet you," said Rowe.

"Now that really does surprise me," said Mercer.

Rowe chuckled and said, "You've been talking to old Browning. I hear he bawled you out."

If he was wondering how this particular piece of news should have got out so quickly, Mercer showed no sign of it.

"You don't want to bother about him. All right. I did ask him to keep you out of Tim Parker's hair. That was some time ago, before I knew much about you. Except that you'd been a policeman yourself."

"A policeman of a sort. A long time ago."

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"I've got nothing against the police. They're quite all right, mostly. Good fellows." Mr. Rowe accompanied this handsome tribute by a puff at his cigar. "Sometimes they take themselves too seriously, that's all. Live and let live, that's my philosophy. Make other people happy and you'll be happy yourself. Take all this National Front business. What *good* does it do? Marching round the streets, shouting and screaming. What do they get out of it?"

"Sore throats and brickbats."

"Exactly. Now I'm just the opposite. I don't object to seeing a few of our colonials coming into the country. Why should I? And once they're in, I do my best to find jobs for them. You saw that building next door? The Employment Agency. I run that too. We can usually find a slot for a boy who's willing to work. Or a girl." He looked at Nahmal, who smiled. "Well, I mustn't stop here talking all night. I expect you and Parker will have a lot of things you want to discuss, now you've met up."

Mr. Rowe finished his whiskey, patted Nahmal on the cheek, and departed in a cloud of benevolence and cigar smoke.

"You mustn't mind his manner," said Parker. "He really does do a lot of good work among the youngsters from India and Pakistan."

"Does it extend to helping them into this country?" said Mercer.

Parker said, "That's a question I've never asked. And if I did ask it, I wouldn't expect it to be answered." He refilled both their glasses. "About that matter we were discussing. I've been making a few inquiries. There might be something in it for both of us. We'd have to give Arnold a cut, of course—he'd be organizing the import."

The conversation became technical and commercial. It was around eleven o'clock and Mercer could hear, from downstairs, the sound of the landlord encouraging the last of the drinkers to leave when another sound obtruded itself. It was a tiny sound, but significant—a click as though someone was turning the handle of the door with caution. Parker did not seem to have noticed it; perhaps his attention was entirely devoted to Nahmal who had got bored with sitting on a hard chair and was now sitting on Parker's lap.

Mercer shifted his own chair very slightly, so that he commanded an uninterrupted view of the door.

Gently, gently, the handle completed its rotation; then the door blasted open and a big brown-faced man came into the room and

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made straight for Parker. He was carrying a long knife which might have come from a ship's galley.

The speed of Parker's reaction suggested that he too had been forewarned by the click of the door handle. With his left arm he swept Nahmal onto the floor. His right hand grabbed the table and jerked it directly between himself and the newcomer, who was unable to stop and fell across it, face downward, dropping the knife as he did so.

Nahmal screamed, "Ramesh!"

The knife slid across the floor. Mercer, without getting up, put one foot on it. He did not think Parker was going to need any help and observed his technique with interest.

His first move was to grab Ramesh by the hair and crash his head down twice onto the table top. As Ramesh twisted himself free, Parker, now standing, grabbed the table with both hands and drove it into Ramesh, hitting him just below the breastbone. Ramesh fell onto his knees. Parker abandoned the table, grabbed one of Ramesh's wrists, and twisted his arm behind his back. The leverage he exerted lifted the Pakistani onto his toes. Blood was running down his face from the cut on his forehead.

"What I ought to do," said Parker, "is feed your face into that fire."

Ramesh said nothing. He was gasping for breath and there was white froth on his lips. Parker jerked his captive arm savagely. Ramesh opened his mouth wide, but no sound came out of it.

"Try anything like that again and you'll end up with two broken arms."

He let Ramesh go. The Pakistani backed away. He had no eyes for anyone but Parker. He said, between gasps, "For that—you will be sorry—I promise you." Then he turned round and went out, pulling the door shut behind him.

"Now I wonder what he meant by that," said Mercer mildly.

Parker had resumed his seat. Nahmal climbed back onto his lap. She was shaking. Mercer thought he would leave him to comfort her. The landlord saw him off the premises, saying, "Mr. Parker having some trouble up there?"

"Nothing he couldn't handle," said Mercer.

In the weeks that followed, Mercer appeared to spend most of his daylight hours wandering round the docks and the streets that lay behind them, eating in small cafés and talking to the Indians and Pakistanis who used them. His friendship with Shallini gave

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him the entrée to this tight little circle.

Most evenings he ended up at the private room behind the China Clipper and drank with Arnold Rowe and Parker. On one occasion he asked whether Ramesh had given any further trouble.

"Ramesh," said Mr. Rowe. "He'll give no trouble. He's back at sea."

"A long trip," said Parker. "He won't be back until Guy Fawkes's day."

The two men looked at each other and laughed. Mercer could tell that there was something behind this exchange, but he did not pursue the matter. He did, however, raise it with Shallini later that evening.

She said, "But of course. Ramesh has to do what Mr. Henderson tells him."

"Mr. Henderson?"

"I mean, Mr. Rowe."

"You didn't say Mr. Rowe. You said Mr. Henderson."

"It was a mistake," said Shallini. "I did not mean to mention his name. Please do not ask me any more."

"I should like to meet him—Mr. Henderson, I mean."

"Naturally you cannot meet him. If he should wish to see you, he will send for you." She was standing beside the bed as she spoke, wearing a thin pair of cotton pajamas, and it may have been because she was cold that she gave a little shiver.

Mercer said, "He sounds an interesting sort of man from the little I've heard about him. No one seems anxious to talk about him."

"No one talks about him," said Shallini.

Nothing more happened for a month. As far as Mercer could tell, he was not followed. Either Superintendent Browning had lost interest, or the observation was being more discreetly arranged.

It was an early November morning of bright sun and blue sky. Mercer was walking up Maze Hill, on his way to Blackheath when the long snout of an Aston-Martin drew level with him, passed him, and stopped. The driver was a boy in chauffeur's uniform with a snub nose and impertinent eyes. He rolled down the window of the driver's seat, leaned out, and said, "Mercer?"

Mercer looked at him coldly and said, "Mr. Mercer."

"Okay, okay," said the boy. "Be like that. Only hop in quick.

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We haven't got a lot of time."

"I've got all the time in the world," said Mercer.

"Well, I haven't. And Mr. Henderson doesn't like being kept waiting."

"Ah," said Mercer. It sounded like the full stop at the end of a long and complicated sentence. He opened the door and stood for a moment before getting in. "You seem to know my name," he said, "but I haven't the pleasure—"

"That's all right. My friends call me Bobby."

"You must let me know when I have the privilege of joining that exclusive circle," said Mercer.

Bobby said, "Sarky, eh?"

He drove in exactly the manner suggested by his name and appearance, impudently, cutting very corner and extracting himself adroitly from every tight squeeze. They kept to the small streets on the South Bank, crossed the Thames by Vauxhall Bridge, and drew up finally in front of a house at the corner of Wilfred Street and Buckingham Gate. Bobby used his own key on the front door and showed Mercer into a room on the ground floor at the back of the house.

It was one of the most perfectly conceived rooms that Mercer ever remembered being in. The floor consisted of narrow strips of wood with a reddish tinge. There was one large rug in the center which his experience in the East told him was either an Isphahan or a Qum. The walls were papered in neutral gray which made a perfect background to the framed prints hung on them. They were mostly military subjects and the scarlet uniforms blazed from the dull gold of the frames. The large fireplace was built into a surround of gray slate into which had been set twelve tiles, painted to represent the twelve months of the year. On the mantel over the fire stood a set of small silver gilt cups with spindly legs.

Bobby, watching him from the doorway said, "Don't try putting one of them in your pocket. We've counted them"—and disappeared quickly. Mercer continued his inspection of the room. He decided that it was the deliberate creation of a fastidious, but masculine taste and had just reached this conclusion when the door opened and Mr. Henderson came in.

Mercer saw a tall thin man, with the look about him of an army officer in plain clothes or maybe the headmaster of a very exclusive preparatory school. The only sign of his age was that his neatly clipped mustache was gray. He said, "Sit down," and

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walked across and sat in an upright chair behind the table. Something that Mercer noticed about him was the way he controlled his body. When he moved it was with conscious elegance. He sat like a coiled spring.

Mercer slouched across to one of the easy chairs and fell back into it—a piece of defensive counterpropaganda which Mr. Henderson noted without apparent resentment. He said, "You do not seem to have made a great success of the last two years of your life."

"It depends what you mean by success," said Mercer.

"After being dismissed from the Metropolitan Police for an assault on a prisoner who was in your custody, you were given a fresh chance by being allowed to join the Police Force of the Ruler of Bahrain. You were dismissed six months later after charges of bribery and extortion were preferred."

"But not pursued."

"No. You were allowed the alternative of dishonorable dismissal. You then came back to England and worked for a time as a laborer. You were dismissed from that job for assaulting a foreman."

"He was a real swine."

"Your reputation by now was such that you found it impossible to get any legitimate work, so you turned to crime—in particular to trading in hard pornography. You took no direct part in this yourself, but acted as protector to men like Leo Chance and Victor Amesbury."

"And boy, did they need protection."

"I would rather you didn't interrupt me."

The words were spoken quietly but Mercer was conscious of the authority and the threat behind them. He had known, from the moment he came into the house, that its owner was no ordinary man.

"I happen to be a friend of Leo Chance. I have been able to do him a number of good turns in the past, for which he felt he owed me favors. One of these favors was to give me a very full account of the events which took place one evening last winter in Barkhurts Mansions. A *full* account, with the names of the two relevant witnesses, who have not, of course, seen fit to open their mouths, but could easily be induced to do so if necessary. You understand me?"

Mercer said nothing.

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"I am telling you this so that there will be no possible misunderstanding about our relative positions. It might otherwise be thought that what I am now doing is to offer you a job. I am doing nothing of the sort. I am enrolling you to fill a necessary position in my organization. Arnold Rowe, who has charge of my operations in the Dockland district, is forced to work with somewhat volatile material."

For the first time a very faint smile touched Mr. Henderson's thin lips.

"You have met Arnold and will appreciate that although he has many excellent qualities, he is *not* a pugilist. That was the reason we gave Parker a fairly nominal job in his office—to look after the welfare of Arnold Rowe."

"Where is Parker?"

Mr. Henderson considered the matter. He said, "It is a difficult question to answer without a precise knowledge of tides and the current in the Thames. But I should surmise that he will have reached Tilbury by now."

Mercer received this news without obvious signs of interest. He was seated at such an angle that the right side of his face was away from Mr. Henderson, who was thus in no position to notice that the white scar down that side of his face had changed color.

He said, "Oh? Why did you kill him?"

"Kill is the wrong word. It suggests something accidental. I had him executed. He made the mistake of antagonizing Ramesh. These people have their own methods of ferreting out secrets which people wish to keep hidden. He was able to confirm, without any possibility of mistake, that Parker was working for Customs and Excise. He was like yourself, an ex-policeman. It had sometimes occurred to me that we were allowed, rather easily, to discover the trivial smuggling offenses Parker was said to have committed. That was why he was only taken into our organization on probation."

Mercer said, "The one time I saw him in action I thought he might be a pro."

"We have a number of professionals working for us too. They had no difficulty in overpowering Parker. We then thought it appropriate that Ramesh should be allowed to execute him."

"And how did he do that?"

"He shot him six times at fairly close range. The first two or three bullets went into his stomach. Ramesh enjoyed that, I am

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told. It was only the last of the six that killed him."

"I imagine you're telling me all this as a sort of cautionary tale," said Mercer easily. "There's no need. I'm not working for Customs or the Police or anyone else. I'm working for myself."

"You are wrong," said Mr. Henderson gently. "You are working for me. Arnold will give you your instructions. There is a Ford Consul motor car outside. It was used by Parker. You can consider it your property. Bobby will give you the keys and the log-book. He will also show you the catch of an ingenious locker, built into the thickness of the offside door. It is useful for a number of purposes. I doubt if we shall see each other again, so I will wish you good day."

In the course of the next few weeks Mercer discovered two things. The first was that "volatile" was an inadequate description of the employees of Arnold Rowe and Company and the clients of the Employment Agency. They were Pakistanis or Indians of both sexes and were found working either in Arnold Rowe's office or in and around the ships that he serviced. Mercer confirmed his suspicion that their entry into the country had been illegally organized and that this fact was used as a threat to bind them to the service of the Organization.

Beyond that he could come to no definite conclusion, since his second discovery was that certain rooms in the Office and the Agency were barred to him. It was in these rooms that the real work of the Organization was carried out. He guessed that the stewards and deckhands might be being used to carry abroad gold and precious stones and to bring back the money realized by their sale on the Continent.

None of this worried him. He kept the simple record of jobs he was given, stood by when Arnold Rowe's clients or servants threatened to be difficult, and dealt with the difficulty appropriately. It took one broken arm and one fractured jaw to convince people that he was not a man to argue with. After that he had little trouble.

The year had turned the corner and it was early in March when he made a request which Shallini found curious. He said, "I saw an odd-looking knife in a shop in Charlton. It had a very thin wavy blade and the handle, I guess, was sharkskin or something of the sort. There were letters engraved in the blade, or it may have been pictures."

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Shallini said, "From your description it sounds like a *kotah-chil*—that is, a girl's knife. There are certain circumstances, you understand, when a girl has to defend her honor."

"So that if I was found with one of those sticking into me, it would be assumed that I had assaulted a girl and that she, or perhaps her lover, had used it on me."

"That would be the assumption. Do you wish me to get it for you?"

Mercer considered the matter. Then he said, "Yes. But only if you can do it so cleverly that it will never be traced to you or me."

"It will take a little time then."

"Time is unimportant."

It was perhaps three weeks after this conversation that Ramesh came out of the Duke of Cumberland public house at closing time and started, alone, to walk back to his lodgings. It was a dark night with the wind driving the clouds steadily in from the east and bringing an occasional spatter of rain. He turned up the collar of his jacket and trudged on, unaware that he was being followed.

His body was found by a patrolling policeman at three o'clock on the following morning. The pathologist who examined him reported one curious fact. The dagger which was driven into his back was not the cause of death. His neck had been broken by a single savage blow from behind. The dagger had been driven in after the man was dead.

"Indian dagger," said Superintendent Browning. "Some sort of symbolism. A feud perhaps."

"I have no doubt it has a message for us," agreed the pathologist. "If we were able to read it."

In spite of the thick carapace of his self-satisfaction, Arnold Rowe always went into the house in Wilfred Street with a sense of unease and breathed more easily when he got away from it again.

He found Mr. Henderson in a thoughtful mood. He said, "Have the police made anything of the killing of Ramesh?"

"According to our contact, no."

"Then I suggest we help them. Allow our man to find the gun with which Parker was shot. It is untraceable, I am sure."

"Certainly. But how will it help them?"

"If you have preserved it in the careful manner I suggested, it

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will still have Ramesh's fingerprints on it. They will be matched with the prints of the body and the solution will be clear even to the uninspired mind of Superintendent Browning. Ramesh killed Parker. One of Parker's Indian friends killed Ramesh. Everyone will be happy. Our friend will gain kudos for discovering the gun. No one will bother further about the case. A grudge killing in an immigrant community."

"It might be the truth at that," said Rowe.

"It might be. But I am sure it is not. Ramesh was killed by Mercer. The leaving of the dagger was a diversionary tactic. It may have convinced the police. It did not convince me."

"How can you be sure?"

"Mercer is a man who is capable of killing in cold blood. His record shows it. Such men are not common. Why he should have killed Ramesh is not clear. Possibly he had private reasons for doing so. Possibly he considered that Parker had been made to suffer unduly."

"If that's true, do you think he himself might be—"

"Working for the police?"

"I must say, the thought had never entered my head."

"It entered mine," said Mr. Henderson, "the first moment he appeared on the scene. It is right to be suspicious, but we must not let our suspicions run away with our common sense. I have checked and cross-checked every move he has made since he was thrown out of the Metropolitan Police two years ago. The accounts all agree. No, I do not think he is a policeman, but I think he is a very dangerous man. He will have to go."

"He's been doing his work admirably. I hardly know who to put in his place."

"Loveridge? Manton? Banks? Straightforward hit-men, but hardly up to Mercer's weight, I agree."

"Are you sure it's necessary to get rid of him?"

Mr. Henderson rubbed a long finger down the side of his face. "I agree with you that we may be wasting a good man. But I have made it a rule in life that when I am in doubt I always take the safer course."

"When you say, get rid of him—?"

"Set your mind at rest. I was not contemplating violence. We will, as so often, allow the law to assist us. I was recently asked to handle a set of eight cameos in their original frames. The frames are, as I think you will agree"—Mr. Henderson got up and

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went across to his wall safe—"almost more beautiful than the paintings. They are said to be the work of Cellini, the Florentine goldsmith. They are far too well-known to be disposed of either here or in the European markets. I convinced the gentleman who stole them on that point and he finally sold them to me for a very modest sum. They will have to be sacrificed for the general good."

Arnold Rowe said, "I don't quite follow you—"

"Take them and have them placed in the concealed pocket of Mercer's car. Bobby has the spare set of keys, so it should not be difficult. Then inform Superintendent Browning, who will be delighted to pursue the matter."

It was three days later, when Mercer was driving down to the Surrey Docks, that he was stopped. He drove up to the dock gates and sounded his horn for the pole to be raised. The gateman came out, examined the number on Mercer's car, and went back into his hut. The pole remained in place. Mercer got out of his car. A police car had driven up behind him, blocking the exit. Superintendent Browning got out, accompanied by a sergeant in uniform and Detective Sergeant Russ.

Browning said, "I have no search warrant, but I take it you have no objection to my making a search of your car."

"You don't need a warrant to search a car," said Mercer coldly. "All you need is reasonable suspicion that it is being used for some illegal purpose."

"I'd forgotten you were once a policeman yourself," said Browning equally coldly. "Well, what about it?"

"No objection," said Mercer. "Should we move it to somewhere where it's not blocking the traffic?" Mercer got back into the car. The sergeant climbed in beside him. The pole was lifted and Mercer drove on a few yards, pulled into the side, and stopped.

"Would you like me to open the door locker for you?" said Mercer. "The catch is a bit tricky until you get the hang of it."

"We can manage," said Browning. "You get out."

They spent an hour over their search while Mercer sat on an upturned crate smoking and watching them.

But the secret locker and the rest of the car were empty of anything except the sort of things which should have been there.

It was six o'clock that evening when Mercer rang the bell of the house in Wilfred Street. He realized that he was being studied through the tiny glass optic which was set in the center of the

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door. He seemed to be relaxed and at ease and was whistling gently between two broken front teeth.

After a full minute the door was opened by Bobby, who said, "Hul-lo," with an emphasis on the second syllable which turned it into a question.

"Hullo, Bobby," said Mercer. "Mr. Henderson here?"

"He's here, but I don't know whether he's free to talk to you."

"Ask him nicely and I'm sure he will," said Mercer. "He'd do anything for *you*, I'm certain."

Bobby grinned, showing a set of sharp white teeth. "You've got a nerve. I'll say that for you. Come in and wait."

Mercer sat on one of the four chairs which were positioned, two on either side, in the hall. They looked as if they might have come from a museum.

There was a murmur of voices from the room at the back and then Bobby reappeared, still with a smile on his face, and said, "In you go, Daniel. The lions are ready."

Mr. Henderson was sitting in his chair behind the table. There were two men with him, both standing. Mercer recognized them. One was called Banks. He had a heavy white face, scarred with the relics of youthful acne, and the shoulders of a weight lifter. The other was Manton, thinner, longer, and with a darkness of hair and complexion which suggested a native strain not far back in his pedigree. Mercer knew him as the more dangerous man.

Mr. Henderson said, "You wanted to speak to me?"

Mercer said, "Yes. I could talk more freely if we were alone."

Mr. Henderson looked at him thoughtfully, came to some conclusion, and made a gesture with one of his hands. Banks and Manton went out of a door in the far side of the room. Mercer made two guesses, both of which were probably correct. The first was that they had not gone very far from the door. The second was that Mr. Henderson's hand was not far from the bell which would recall them.

He moved away from the table and slouched down in the chair he had occupied when he had visited the house before. He said, "I had a turnup with the police. They seemed to think I might be carrying stolen goods in my car."

"Yes?"

"They didn't find anything. Being cautious by nature, I'd put a marker on the door locker, so I knew it had been opened. I found a very fine set of eight framed cameos inside. I recognized them,

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of course. It was headline news some months ago when they were lifted from Apsley House."

Again Mr. Henderson said, "Yes?" There was no more than polite interest in his voice.

"My first idea was to throw them into the river. But, really, I hadn't the heart to waste them. So I had a better idea. I got in touch with the small private insurance company which had covered them."

Again Mr. Henderson said, "Yes?" For the first time there was an undercurrent of real interest in his voice.

"You didn't know, perhaps, that they had been insured for £80,000. For some reason the fact was not publicized. I was working at third hand, through the friend of a friend. He found out that the insurers were prepared to pay £10,000 to get them back, no questions asked."

Mercer put one hand into his inside pocket. Mr. Henderson's hand shifted slightly behind the desk. Mercer pulled out a thick envelope.

"I thought, seeing the goods had come from you, we ought to split the proceeds. Even-steven. There's five thousand in there, all in nice old tens. No history to any of them." Without moving from his chair he tossed the envelope onto the table.

Mr. Henderson made no move to touch it. He said, "What exactly did you mean, seeing that the goods had come from me?"

"It was a fair guess," said Mercer mildly. "In view of the fact that the police seemed to know all about the locker. Also, I imagined that you would have kept a spare set of the car keys."

Mr. Henderson stretched out one hand, drew the envelope toward him, opened it, and examined the contents.

Then he said, "Perhaps I was wrong about you."

"Wrong?"

"I thought you had plenty of muscle, but no brains. I've been looking for someone like you for a long time. I think we might deal very well together."

"Do you know," said Mercer, "the same thought had occurred to me."

"Q"

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THE HORSE IN THE HOUSE

by ***ROBERT TWOHY***

One afternoon in March, Moorman broke his personal record for Parking Tickets Received. He had numerous errands in various downtown areas, and each time he ran into a delay. On returning to the car he would find official notice of his transgression under the windshield wiper—except the last time, when the meter maid stood by the door, inscribing her name on the ticket.

He stood at her shoulder as she finished this. He nodded approvingly. "You have a neat schoolgirl hand."

She gave him a serene smile and slid the ticket under his windshield wiper.

"That makes the fourth stroke of the lash," said Moorman.

"I know," she said happily. "I wrote each one."

"Goodbye, Zorro," said Moorman, as she bounced away, her day fulfilled.

Moorman, with his four tickets and the back of the car filled with purchases, drove toward the outlying district where he lived, meditating on the American judicial system.

A siren suddenly ululated maniacally. He glanced in the mirror, saw a flashing red light. He eased over to the curb and sat there, awaiting retribution for he knew not what.

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After the formalities of showing his registration and surrendering his license, and waiting while the policeman went back to his radio to check and see if Moorman's shabby, rumpsprung 1961 Galaxie was a hot car, or if Moorman himself (Male, 6'1", 190, born 1937, hair brown) was wanted throughout the length and breadth of California, the policeman sauntered back, and slipped out his ballpoint. "I'm citing you for a faulty muffler."

"Oh, it has a few holes, but does its best. The car's quieter than a motorcycle, or most foreign cars, or a panel truck."

"Maybe so. But they don't have faulty mufflers. If they do, I'll cite 'em."

Moorman said, "That siren of yours is the most terrifying noise polluter in the city. Sounds like the Gestapo rounding up undesirables."

"It has an effect, all right. People stop." The policeman finished the ticket and passed it to Moorman. "Sign there."

Moorman had an impulse to sign Ignatz Kleistershtroven, Col., S.S.—which was an appellation he sometimes used. But weary from battling hordes in the shops, and a little dispirited generally, he didn't feel up to the ensuing excitement.

He signed his name. "This is my fifth ticket today."

"You should drive more carefully."

"The others were parking tickets."

"You should park more carefully."

"I park delightfully. But if you get only an hour on the meter, and you're lucky to find a space four blocks from your store, and you find yourself fortieth in line in front of the checkout clerk, time kind of slips away."

"Yeah. Well, that's the way it goes." The policeman returned his license and strode lithely back to his car.

Moorman drove toward home. He had just nosed into a rather narrow street that he had used for years when he saw to his chagrin that a one-way arrow was pointing toward him. He stopped, glanced to see that it was clear to back out—then the same maniacal ululation pounded his skull again.

He whipped his eyes front, whence came the terrorizing shrieks. A police car, red light flashing, was storming up the narrow street toward him. It slammed to a stop six feet from his bumper. A head was thrust out the driver's window, and fiendish eyes glared at him. A voice roared, "Back that thing out and park it!"

He backed out of the street, continued to back, found a space he

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could back into. The police car, siren still pounding, came out of the one-way street and double parked, leaving just enough space on that side of the street for clearance by another car, if no car coming the other way happened to be touching the center stripe. The siren was turned off. The policeman leaped out of his car and strode back to Moorman.

Moorman showed his registration, surrendered his license, and his legitimacy was checked again. He sat without movement, watching cars slow, then creep past the police car.

The policeman strode back to him, looking a trace less fiendish, slightly less inclined to go for his gun. He said, "You were on a one-way street."

"I know. I saw the sign."

"Why'd you try to sneak up it?"

"Because it was a two-way street when I last used it."

"That must have been at least two days ago."

"Right. Two days ago."

"This is today. Now it's a one-way street."

"Right. I have to learn to move faster, to keep up with the changing scene."

The policeman was writing. He glanced up eagerly as an elderly woman crawled her car uncertainly and timorously past the patrol car; Moorman saw that the policeman was ready to leap into action, should there be a crunch. The woman's car made it to safety, and the policeman scowled, grumbled something, and returned to the ticket. He completed it and passed it to Moorman. "This'll help you remember that this is a one-way street now."

Moorman signed his correct name, received the ticket and his license. He said, "This is my sixth ticket of the day."

The policeman stared at him closely, and sniffed the air in front of him. "You been drinking?"

"No."

"How come you got six tickets?"

"I guess it was my karma."

"You're karma-what?"

Moorman blinked. That was a puzzler. He didn't know how to answer it.

"You must have done *something* to get six tickets."

"I did. I drove downtown."

"A guy doesn't get six tickets unless there's something strange going on."

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"Right," said Moorman.

The policeman gazed at him a while. His eyes were not entirely fiendish now but they seemed ready to become so in an instant.

Moorman began to hum a song. He hummed it softly and liltingly, gazing back at the policeman in a gentle, harmless manner. Music often engenders peaceful feelings. And humming the song made Moorman feel a little better.

The policeman glowered, then finally turned and strode back to his car. He hadn't recognized the song. He was quite a young policeman. It was a song of the early 1960's. It was titled "May the Bird of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose."

Moorman made it unticketed the rest of the way home. He parked the Galaxie in the two-car garage and pulled the garage door shut. He felt reasonably safe from tickets now, although sirens might suddenly start shrieking, followed by stamping, shouting, pounding on the garage door, and demands for access to check if the muffler had yet been repaired. You couldn't be sure it wouldn't happen.

He carried bags and packages out the rear door of the garage, across the patio, and into his house through the kitchen door. He set bags that belonged in the kitchen in the kitchen, and carried others into the living room. "Hello, Rothstein," he said to the creature asleep in the fish tank in that room—but Rothstein remained in his customary coma, and didn't respond with a wag of his tail. Moorman said, "The hell with you," and went out for more packages.

He made three trips. Impending was a party for his wife Lisa's 28th birthday, which was the reason for the heavy shopping he had done today. He had bought numerous groceries at a supermarket, a cake at a bakery, fancy cheeses at a fancy cheese shop, a small antique desk at an art shop, and also a horse, carved of rough blond wood, on a bronze stand, rearing, ready to be up and away, all rolling eyes and flaring nostrils and flying mane. He was certain it would gallop directly into Lisa's heart. She liked horses in general—and Moorman, who loved carved wood, had found this piece beautiful.

He set the horse on a table near the couch, and admired it, while Rothstein remained stuporous. Then he bestirred himself, lugged the antique desk upstairs, and set it in Lisa's workroom. He returned to the kitchen and put stuff away, got a glass of white wine, went back into the living room, and sipped the wine

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and admired the horse again. Then he looked at the six yellow tickets that he had put on a near table, and began to look thoughtful, as an idea started to hatch in his mind. He murmured, "How about a rematch?"

He finished the wine, dropped on the couch, mulled over the idea, and found it promising. He drew in his breath and gave a tentative whinny. It didn't sound bad. Rusty—he hadn't whinnied in quite a while, but the whinny had always been one of his finest sound effects. Throat just needed loosening.

He sat there on the couch, breathing deeply, working on breath control; then he started whinnying, softly at first, then getting more heart into it—working up the proper catch of air in the upper nasal passages, and the sudden thrust of air into the tonsil area, that gave depth and resonance and reality to the tone. Suddenly it was there, fine as ever—wild, frenzied, true!

He was ready. He got up, opened the back door wide—but first he would call Lisa.

He went back to the couch, reached for the phone, and dialed the number of his sister-in-law. His sister-in-law, who lived in another town, was sick, and Lisa had driven off in their other car, a less reprehensible '72 Pontiac, to spend a few days with her.

Lisa answered. Moorman said, "Hi, dear. How's Sylvia?"

"Much better. I'll be home tomorrow."

"Great. Miss you, dear . . . I went shopping today. I picked up some things for your birthday and six traffic tickets."

"You're joking!"

"Rarely do I joke. Sometimes I embellish a little, but in this case it's the stone truth. Six tickets . . . but a rematch is coming up."

"A rematch?"

"With the Police Department. I'm not convinced that they're Notre Dame to my Slippery Rock."

Lisa, who knew her husband well, murmured, "Oh, my! Oh my oh my oh my! What deviltry do you have in mind?"

"Well, blowing up the station house is passé, it's been done to death. So I'll work in other vineyards. I intend to explore their ability at receiving telephonic communications correctly. I think they might have a weakness in that area."

"Another of your games, eh?"

"This time," said Moorman, gazing at his heap of yellow tickets, "it is richly deserved."

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"That may be. Do you think you'll wind up in jail again?"

"If I play my cards right."

"If I come home tomorrow and don't find you, I should call the jailhouse?"

"Yes. Inquire for The Jockey."

"Is that your new alias?"

"For this caper. From now through the evening I intend to gallop a beautiful fiery palomino, with flying mane, through the dazed ranks of the constabulary—leaving shock and sorrow and as much discontent as I can achieve." And Moorman smiled at the carved horse that reared on its bronze stand. He felt affection already for that animal.

She said, "All right, dear . . . have a nice time. And I'll see you tomorrow night—if not home, at the jailhouse."

"Love to Sylvia, and tell her she's a rat for getting sick and taking you away from me."

Moorman hung up, feeling fine. He always felt fine after a talk with Lisa.

He went over to the horse and patted the heroic rump. He said, like Humphrey Bogart, "We'll show 'em, won't we shweethaht?"

It was now six o'clock. First, before he got involved with the Police Department, he should feed Rothstein, who liked to eat promptly at six.

He went into the kitchen, got Rothstein's dinner, and fed it into the tank. Rothstein, dozing at the bottom, heard the patter of succulent morsels on his liquid roof, wagged his tail happily, and surged to the surface. He curled his lip over the first chew, gave a sigh of satisfaction, looked at Moorman approvingly, and proceeded to dine.

Moorman said, "For a sackhound who doesn't put out a lick of energy all day you sure can pack it away."

He put the food back in the kitchen, went to a drawer, took out a tape recorder in a case; took it out of the case, plugged it into a wall socket near the couch, turned it on; set it beside him on the couch. He took the microphone in his left hand, and with his right took the telephone from the hook, laid it beside him, dialed a number, picked it up again. He held the telephone a little away from his ear, and the microphone a few inches from it and from his mouth. Now he was ready.

A flat young voice said, "Police Department."

"Yes. Give me the Horse Squad."

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"The what?"

"Horse Squad."

"This is the Police Department."

"Right. Give me the Horse Squad."

The voice was sharp now. "Who is this?"

"I want to report a horse."

"Is this a joke?"

"Who is this?"

"This is Officer Packer. Who are you?"

"Citizen Moorman. Connect me with the Horse Squad."

"We don't have a Horse Squad."

"Then give me a superior officer."

The young man was silent. Moorman pictured him as looking a little bewildered. That was fine, if true—but Packer was a minnow. He was after bigger fish.

A minute or so passed. Then an older, harder voice came on: "This is Sergeant Elspringer. Who is this?"

"Elsprocken? Did you say Elsprocken?"

"Elspringer."

"Oh, I thought you said Elsprocken. I used to know a man named Elsprocken. That was years ago—last I heard he was dead. That's why I was surprised when you said you were him. He was a nice guy. I wonder if you could be related. It's an unusual name, Elspraggle."

After a few moments the hard voice said, "Are you pulling a joke or something?"

Moorman's voice was tense. "Why is it that everyone in the Police Department wants me to tell a joke? I don't know any jokes. All I'm trying to do is report a horse."

"What about it?"

"That's what I want to find out."

Moorman heard paper rustling. He assumed a ballpoint was at the ready position. "What's your name?"

"Jack Moorman."

"Address?"

"1106 Sandridge Road."

"All right . . . now what's your report?"

"There's this horse. It's across the room. I'm looking at it now. I was upstairs, putting something in my wife's workroom, and when I came down a few minutes ago, there was this horse. And the back door is wide-open."

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Silence. Then the voice again: "You're saying there's a horse in your house?"

Moorman liked the sound of that. It had a nice lilting rhythm. A horse in your house . . . worth hearing again. "Repeat that, please?"

"Is there a horse in your house?"

"That's what I'm saying. A horse in my house."

"A real horse?"

Now it got a little tricky. He had to pick his words carefully. "What do you mean, a real horse? What's a horse that isn't a real horse?" His voice was tense again. "Do you think I'd call you if it was an imaginary horse, or a rockinghorse, or a carved wooden object of art?"

He waited. He had asked the key question. If the opponent gave the right answer—which in this case was "yes"—then the game was over.

Moorman always, when possible, threw in the key question. That was part of the game. When he played, he believed in going for the jugular, but doing it fairly. If the opponent correctly responded to the key question, then the opponent was the winner—and Moorman would concede.

In this case the Sergeant didn't respond correctly—and the game went on.

The Sergeant said, "I'm trying to get this straight, is all. You say you went upstairs and came down and now there's a horse in your house. Now . . ." The Sergeant's voice was a little less hard and sure. He seemed not entirely certain what to say next. "A horse . . . all right, what about it? I mean—what's the horse—I mean, do you know anything about it?"

"Only that it's light brown, or golden, got a light brown mane . . . looks spirited, strong, looks like it's worth some money—looks like a boy horse. Not a plow horse, not a nag . . . what can I say? I only just met him."

"You've never seen him before?"

"Before I came down from my wife's workroom and saw him across the living room?" Another tricky one. He thought a moment. "Well—what can I say? I've seen good-looking golden horses before." That was true. "They sort of look pretty much alike—four legs, mane, tail, eyes, teeth, nostrils . . . a horse looks generally like another horse, if they're both the same color and size and style." No one could say that was a lie. "He's just a big handsome

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golden horse—I couldn't swear on an oath that I've never seen him before. All I know is, I see him now—and he's right here in this room, and the back door is wide-open."

"Are there horses around where you live?"

"It's an ordinary subdivision. You see cats, dogs, a guy down the street walks a badger on a leash . . . *WHOA, FELLA! WHOA, WHOA!*" His tone was suddenly sharp, anxious.

The Sergeant said quickly, "What's going on?"

"*WHOA! TAKE IT EASY!*" Moorman laid down the phone and the microphone, ran across the room, beat his hands on the wall, jumped on the floor, gave a whinny with as much fervor as he could muster, then picked up a chair by the back and threw it against the wall. He whinnied again, jumped around some more, crying in his own voice, "*WHOA BOY—EASY, DAMN YOU! TAKE IT EASY!*" He slowed his jumping, then stopped—he whinnied again, ending in blowing through his lips, and said, "All right, all right—good boy! Everything's all right!"

He came back to the phone and the microphone. His broad face was damp and his hair tousled, but he felt invigorated—a little exercise was always refreshing. He said into the phone, "Started jumping around, slamming against the wall . . . seems under control now. I hope so anyway. There's still kind of a wild look in his eye." All he had said had been true, after a fashion.

He was pleased. It had been good whinnying. Apparently it had been good enough for the Sergeant. The hard voice was uneasy now. "You know, we're not trained for horses. It might be better if you contacted the SPCA."

"*That's called 'The buck stops when I can find someone to pass it to,'* isn't it?"

"Uh . . . what was that?"

"Come on, Major—"

"Sergeant. Sergeant Elspringer."

"Right, whatever you say. But when a crime is taking place, is the SPCA the responding agency?"

"Crime? What crime? All that's happened is that there's a horse in your house."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Am I sure that there's a horse in your house? *You're* the one who says so!"

"There's a horse, all right. I'm looking at it." He looked at it. "What I mean is—are you sure that's *all* it is—just a stray horse,

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wandering casually by chance in my living room? With the door wide-open? Do you think the horse opened the door?"

"No, but—"

"No. *Somebody* opened that door, Sergeant—somebody who knew how to turn a knob. You can't lay *that* on the horse! Do you *really* think horses know how to turn doorknobs?"

"No," said the Sergeant. His voice had lost its hard edge. It seemed somewhat unraveled.

"That's the point, the whole point, don't you see?—the open door! That's the whole sinister point!"

"Sinister? What do you mean, sinister?"

"I mean isn't it obvious that there's more to this than just an ordinary case of a horse in a house?"

The Sergeant was silent. Moorman's voice was low, intent. "Don't you find it a little bit odd that a horse finds its way into the house of one particular man, *through a door that was closed before the horse got to it,* on the *very night* when that particular man's wife happens to be out—and the man is *alone?*"

The Sergeant said, in his new unraveled voice, "One particular man?"

"Me, of course. I'm speaking of me."

"You?"

"Me. Didn't you get my name?"

"Moorman."

"Right. Jack Moorman . . . and that name means nothing to you?"

"Should it?"

Moorman gave a brief incredulous laugh. "They've told you nothing? Your superiors? How long have you been in police work?"

"Eighteen years."

"I imagine," said Moorman, "that if in eighteen years you haven't been told about that name, you'll reach retirement without being told. Because they must have you pegged as someone not equipped to handle that information."

The Sergeant muttered, "I . . . I don't know what you're talking about. You may be trying to make an idiot of me—"

"I have no opinion on that, I don't have enough data. What are your symptoms?"

"I think you . . . You're saying that you're a secret agent or something?"

"Who said that? Did I say I was a secret agent?"

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"You've been hinting—"

"How do you know it isn't true?"

The Sergeant mumbled, "I don't know anything. I don't even know there's a horse in your house."

"Come on, Sergeant, you *heard* him! You can at least believe your own ears, can't you?"

"All right, I heard the horse, but . . . well, this secret agent stuff, someone smuggling a horse in your house . . . Why? Even if you *are* a secret agent, why would they . . . who are they, anyway? Who would want to—to—"

"To kill me? Is that what you're hinting, Sergeant?" Moorman paused; then, voice reflective: "Do you really think they'd go that far? . . . But yes! Yes, indeed! Why not? You could be right, Sergeant! Indeed you could. I agree. I think you've hit it. They've put me in the hospital before, and that hasn't worked, I just get right back on their trail . . . Kill me, you say? Why not? They've certainly enough reason to decide to terminate me with the most extreme prejudice. And this horse has wild-looking eyes." His voice now crackled with excitement. "Why by horse, Sergeant? Why would they come up with the idea of assassination by horse?"

The Sergeant muttered, "I don't know."

"I'm getting it, it's coming, it's coming . . ." He beat his head with the heel of his left hand, fingers curled around the microphone. "The subtlety of it, the incredible subtlety—who has the mind for it, who has the mind? One man, Sergeant, only one man—*KLEISTERSHTROVEN!*"

"What?" gasped the Sergeant.

"Kleistershtroven, man! Who else could it be? Only he has the mind for it. I thought he was in Prague. But no—he's here! Has to be! Here, in the city . . . and how do I know? How do I know, Sergeant? *HOW DO I KNOW?*"

"I don't know!" The Sergeant's voice was suddenly desperate. "I'm going to get the Lieutenant!"

"Yes, get the Lieutenant! Tell him it's Kleistershtroven! And he's attempting murder by horse!"

Moorman lay back on the couch, temporarily spent. After a few minutes his hard breathing subsided. He gazed at Rothstein and murmured, "Method acting is no cinch, Rothstein. Takes a lot out of a guy." Rothstein, dead asleep, gazed out at space with his milky-blue eye.

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The voice that eventually came on the phone was cold, deadly. "Moorman? This is Inspector Hyster."

"Ah, Hyster! You're the guy was out here last October, and kind enough to dig up my tomato patch."

"That's right. You got us to arrest you on suspicion of murdering your wife and burying her out there—you made us look like chumps." He didn't use the word "chumps"—he used an earthier word.

"You're too modest, Inspector. We did it together."

"Now you're trying to do it again. You've got Sergeant Elspringer out of his mind. He came rushing into the Lieutenant's office, yelled that there was a government operative named Moorman who was about to be assassinated—that a foreign agent named Kleistershtroven had smuggled a wild killer-horse into his house, to kick him to death. Fortunately the name Moorman rang a bell with the Lieutenant—he looked up the file. Then he called me—you're a menace to the Department, Moorman. Now the Sergeant is lying in the dayroom, glassy-eyed, with cold cloths on his head."

"He'll be a better policeman for having been led to use his imagination. He'll learn from this that things aren't always what one thinks they are."

"I'm coming out to your place, Moorman. I'm going to talk to you about filing false reports. Why do you do it?"

"Who says I filed a false report?"

"You told Sergeant Elspringer that you're a secret agent."

"No, I just asked him why he thought I was."

"You told him that someone was trying to kill you by horse."

"What I said was that certain people might feel they had reason to kill me. I'm sure you agree with that."

"You said there was a horse in your house."

"That's right. That's how all this confusion got started."

"Is the horse there now?"

"Certainly, why wouldn't he be? He seems peaceful, not dangerous at all . . . seems to be looking at Rothstein in an odd way, though. I don't know . . ."

"Who's Rothstein?"

"The goldfish. Do horses eat goldfish?"

"Stop being funny."

"I'm not being funny. Asking if horses eat goldfish is a legitimate question. Answer yes, no, or I don't know. One of those an-

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swers may win you some kind of prize."

"I'm coming out, Moorman. And if I find there's no horse there, you and I are going to have things to talk about."

"Right. I don't blame you for sounding grim. This has been a trying evening for us all."

He hung up, got up, stretched, felt satisfied. He went over to the rearing horse and patted its epopoean rump. Then he looked at Rothstein, peacefully senseless. He said, "You sleep too much. You're going to O.D. on sleep."

He took a penny from his pocket and tossed it. It fell in the tank with a watery clunk. Rothstein came to with a start, shook his head, stared wildly around, then thrashed away to a corner of the tank, where he sought to push himself backward through the glass. Then he realized that he wasn't being pursued. He saw the penny lying on the sandy floor of his domain, looked puzzled, then vengeful, and attacked the intruder. Then he turned his head, gazed balefully at Moorman, who was grinning at him, looked disdainful, and spat out a bubble. He wasn't amused by Moorman's japeries. He was a serious-minded goldfish. He settled haughtily to the bottom, and went back to sleep.

Moorman went to the phone, looked up a number, and called. A voice said, "*Evening Chronicle.*"

"Is Greg Hall there, by any chance?"

"I think he is. Who's this?"

"Jack Moorman."

A pause. Then another voice came on. "Moorman? The guy I wrote the story on last October?"

"Yeah. The same."

"That was a hell of a story. What's up, Moorman? You been burying your wife again?"

"No. But the cops may be on my trail."

"Really?" The voice was eager. "What are you cooking up now?"

"Not much. No corpses this time. Just a routine horse-in-the-house gambit."

"Say that again?"

"Well, you know the cops—they get some weird ideas. It's a carved wooden horse, a gift for my wife's birthday. I never said it was a real horse. But that seems to be their thinking."

"You didn't correct them."

"You know cops—they like to find out things their own way. Inspector Hyster is on his way to my place now."

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"Hyster? You got that poor guy twisting slowly in the wind again?"

"Not me. Karma. My call went through a bunch of people and wound up with Hyster."

"He must have been born under a dark star. Well, what's going to happen? Are you going to be arrested again?"

"Probably."

"What charge?"

"Filing a false report and impersonating a government agent. Maybe also felonious assault on an officer."

"Really? Who'd you assault?"

"Nobody. But a Sergeant Elspringer is lying down in the day-room with cold compresses on his head."

"Should I get right out to your place?"

"No. I'm not arrested yet. But I think I can swing it. Check at the Police Department in an hour or so."

Moorman hung up. He turned off the tape recorder. He unplugged it, wrapped the cord, set the microphone in its compartment, put the apparatus back in its case, and into the drawer where it belonged.

If he was arrested he would tell Lisa about it, at the police station; and she could take it down to the office of the *Evening Chronicle* and play it for Greg Hall.

They might get some smiles, and Hall could dress up his story—sinking the harpoons a little deeper into Hyster and Elspringer, who were undoubtedly fine guys, dedicated public servants, amiable sires of delightful, adoring offspring, but still and all representatives of the institution that had bestowed on Moorman six traffic tickets in one day. Thus they were caught in the jaws of retribution.

Afterward Lisa could play the tape in the D.A.'s office and have Moorman sprung.

The doorbell rang. It was Inspector Hyster, a tall man with a bony face and unfriendly eyes. He said, barely moving thin lips, "Where's the horse?"

"Right there. Isn't it beautiful? I got it for my wife's birthday."

"And this is what you called the Police Department to report."

"Lisa wasn't home, and I wanted to brag about it to somebody."

"You think fooling with the Police Department is a lot of fun, don't you?"

"I think it's a lot of work."

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"You've pulled one joke too many."

"I didn't pull a joke. I just said there was a horse in my house. The conversation then took some odd turns."

"And you purposely gave the Sergeant the idea that you were a government agent. I want you to come down to the station."

"Are you going to book me?"

"I'm going to ask you and Sergeant Elspringer to talk to Captain Sprong, and go over with him just what was said on the phone. If we find out there's grounds for charges against you—"

"Believe me, Inspector," said Moorman earnestly, "I'll give you all the help I can."

He went to the coat closet and got his coat, while the Inspector watched him, with hostile eyes. He paused to pat the horse on its lyrical rear. "So long," he said. "You did everything that could have been asked of you."

He said to Rothstein, "Take care of things. And for your own good, take a turn around the tank at least once while I'm gone."

He picked up his wallet and looked at his tickets. "Six in one day. Thanks for the rematch."

Hyster rasped, "What are you talking about?"

"It's been not too bad so far. If things go well at the station—"

Hyster said, with icy intensity, "I'll nail you if I can, Moorman."

"I like your spirit of revenge, Inspector. It's a rematch for you too, isn't it? I know you'll do your best to book me. That's what makes a good game, isn't it? Spirited competition, strong opposition . . . without that, what's the fun?"

They went out. Now the house was deserted, except for the horse, rampant, and Rothstein, zonked.

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a *NEW* Pierre Chambrun story by

HUGH PENTECOST

The Hotel Beaumont, as you know, is "the world's top luxury hotel." It is a self-governing principality in the heart of New York, and its ruling prince is Pierre Chambrun, who "can look like a compassionate father confessor or a hanging judge, depending on his mood." And depending on the highly sensitive matter of the moment—especially if it's a matter of imminent murder . . .

CHAMBRUN AND THE DOUBLE EVENT

by HUGH PENTECOST

It is one of the legends surrounding the Hotel Beaumont, world's top luxury hotel, located in New York, that Pierre Chambrun, its manager (himself a legend in his own lifetime), has a private radar system, probably internally installed. Chambrun is apparently able to foretell anything that may interfere with the Swiss-watch operation of his hotel. The truth is, there is nothing magical about it. No one who works for Chambrun, from Miss Ruysdale, his fabulous secretary, down to the lowest busboy in Room Service, would dream of noticing anything remotely out of the ordinary in a day's business without passing the information on to The Man. He has an extraordinary capacity for putting two and two together and coming up with the right answer, which may just happen to be five.

I am Mark Haskell, the public relations man for the Beaumont. I probably know more about things that have happened in the hotel and have never been made public than anyone except Chambrun himself and possibly Betsy Ruysdale. Some of those things are funny, some are tragic. As in every hotel we have to deal with alcoholics, with elegant call girls, with old men who die

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in the wrong beds, with cheating husbands and cheating wives, with foreign diplomats claiming diplomatic immunity, and on and on. But there have been suicides and murders that cannot be kept hidden.

Take the case of a sixteen-year-old girl who now lies in a coma in a luxurious suite on one of our upper floors, all her medical expenses paid for by Chambrun himself. He visits her every day, praying, I suspect, to whatever deity he believes in, for her recovery, which the doctors tell him is possible if not probable. He visits her because she represents to him a personal failure. He should have guessed, he has told me over and over, what was likely to happen to her, or someone like her.

"The facts were all there and I overlooked one of them," he says.

The facts may have been all there for him, but none of the rest of us saw them or even thought of trying to put them together until it was all over.

I had two major headaches on that particular day. There was the coming-out ball for Judy Horween, the steel heiress. Judy, whom I have never met to this day, may be the greatest doll ever, but her grandmother, Mathilda Horween, who was engineering the ball, makes the Wicked Witch of the North look like Florence Nightingale. She is, if I may say so, a domineering and impossible old bag. Decked out in jewels like a Christmas tree, she descended on us the last day with demands for changing dozens of details that were to drive the catering department, the security people, and the telephone-switchboard crew out of their minds. The Dowager Duchess of Bilgewater, someone called her.

She stormed into Chambrun's office, almost literally brushing Miss Ruysdale aside—an off-tackle run—and made her demands to an astonished Chambrun who sat behind his desk, smoking a cigarette and sipping his inevitable demitasse of Turkish coffee.

"And I'm leaving Mr. Lucas behind me to see to it that my instructions are carried out to the letter!" Mathilda Horween said, and made an exit that would have put Bette Davis to shame.

Mr. Reginald Lucas, freed from his leash, gave Chambrun a helpless shrug. Reggie Lucas is an aging queen. He wears his hair mod-long, dresses in outlandish mod-clothes, adorns himself in a necklace and rings, and struggles to look 22 when he is nearer 42. But he has an engaging kind of acid humor.

"Her Majesty has spoken," he said to Chambrun, with a wry

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smile. "I suspect, my dear Chambrun, that you will carry on exactly in your own fashion: You will not, I trust, resent it if I tell her I *tried* to get you to do things her way. Your world will not come to an end if you don't follow her instructions, but mine certainly will if I haven't tried to persuade you."

"We aim to please here at the Beaumont," Chambrun said. "But only so far, Mr. Lucas."

Chambrun is a short, square, dark man, with very bright black eyes buried in deep pouches. He can look like a compassionate father confessor or a hanging judge, depending on his mood. He was midway between those two extremes at that moment, outraged by Mathilda Horween but with some sympathy for Reggie Lucas. "The late Mr. Horween, I take it, was beaten to death," he said mildly.

"He didn't wait for that eventuality," Reggie said. "An astute mixture of sleeping pills and bonded bourbon whiskey did the job. His last words to me, the night before he indulged in that fatal combination, were to the effect that I might be able to endure her since I wouldn't be expected to make love to her. Imagine what the poor devil must have suffered."

"It is beyond imagining," Chambrun said.

"All fangs and razor blades," Reggie said.

I have indicated that I had two hot potatoes to handle that day. The second one was Robert Gaynor, the movie star and sex symbol. He had no connection whatsoever with the Horween ball. I suspect Madame Horween belonged to a generation when actors and golf professionals were considered second-class citizens instead of national heroes. Gaynor's presence in the hotel's most luxurious accommodations might have convinced her the Beaumont was going to seed. His existence was of no consequence to her, and she didn't read the gossip columns because the gossipers of today cover very little of what Mrs. Horween considered the social aristocracy. That evening, when she saw the crowds in the lobby, she would assume the "bourgeoisie" had come to see the socially elite, when in fact they would be there to catch a glimpse of the glamorous Robert Gaynor.

They were not due to catch a glimpse of Gaynor that night because he had made plans for something very private. It is necessary to describe his accommodations at the Beaumont. There are three penthouses on the roof of the hotel. Two of them are

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cooperatively owned—one by Chambrun, and one by a very old lady who lives there with her memories and a particularly obnoxious Japanese spaniel. The third penthouse is reserved by the hotel for very special guests. Robert Gaynor fell into that category.

Gaynor had stayed at the hotel several times before, but on those occasions he had been eager for public adulation. He had been gracious to autograph hunters, endured being swamped in the lobby by screaming females, all part of the promotion of his sensational career. This time it was something else again. His presence in the hotel was to be kept a secret.

Room Service waiters and maids must keep their lips sealed. The famous star would not circulate in the hotel. He would register under a phony name—what we call "a John Smith" in the Beaumont. In case, by some misadventure, his presence became known, he must be put up where no one could get at him. Penthouse Number Three was the answer.

He arrived the morning of the Horween Ball, was registered in advance, and hurried, unnoticed, up to the roof. I was delegated to make sure everything was to his liking.

Gaynor wasn't quite real, I thought. You don't ordinarily use the word "beautiful" to describe a man. He had golden blond hair and a profile that could have come off an old Greek coin. He was slim, muscular, and for all the delicate beauty, his face was strong. He was a very, very male man. He was the kind of heroic figure romantic lady authors of another time must have dreamed of at night and written about immediately after breakfast.

He was relaxed and rather charmingly sardonic when I met him.

"You may wonder why all the secrecy, Mark," he said, jumping to first names as many people in show business do. Maybe it was a way of indicating he was a "regular fellow."

"Having seen you swarmed under in the past I can understand it," I said.

"There's a special reason," he said, "and I'm going to tell you what it is to make certain there's nothing slipshod about my protection."

"Knowing the reason won't make us any more attentive to your wishes," I said.

He turned away from me and looked out the windows across the roof. "It's a woman," he said.

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"Am I supposed to be surprised?" I asked him.

He turned back to me, brooding. "You may wonder why I have chosen such a very public place for such a very private meeting," he said. "Private places are almost impossible for me to find. One glance at my face and the whole damn city will be hammering on my door. You can save me from that. Another important fact is that the lady is a guest here in the hotel. She can slip up here without attracting attention."

"Simply arranged," I said.

"It has to be tonight, Mark, because tonight her husband will be out of town."

"Oh, brother," I said. We don't like cheating wives or cheating husbands in the Beaumont. They often lead to explosions.

He must have seen something in the look I gave him. "This isn't a tawdry affair," he said. "She is the only woman I have ever really loved in all my life."

"So good luck," I said, wondering what Chambrun would think when I told him. I would tell him, of course, because that was routine.

"I'll be ordering dinner," he said. "When the room-service waiter brings it we'll be out of sight. He is just to leave the dinner and go."

"No problem," I said.

"I could run the risk of your waiter recognizing me, but not recognizing the lady," Gaynor said.

That was all there was to that conversation with Robert Gaynor. I certainly didn't think of it at the moment as a prelude to violence. Angry or jealous husbands don't react predictably to being cuckolded, but carefully planned murder is not a usual option.

When I got back to my office, which is down the hall on the second floor from Chambrun's, I found a message summoning me into the Presence. Chambrun was surrounded by hotel personnel. Betsy Ruysdale stood at his elbow, dictation pad ready. Mr. Amato, the banquet manager, was there. So was Jerry Dodd, our chief security officer with his sharp fox-face, and Douglas Muir, our Scot maintenance engineer, chewing on the stem of an unlighted pipe. Mr. Atterbury, the night desk clerk, was there, and Claude Lavalle, the head man in the hotel's grand ballroom where Judy Horween was to burst on society as a debutante that night. There was Miss Veach, the nighttime switchboard chief

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operator, and hovering on the fringes of this group was Reggie Lucas, representing the Dowager Duchess of Bilgewater.

"Mrs. Horween has made more last-minute demands on us," Chambrun said. "On some of them we will deliver, others we will not."

"Oh, my!" Reggie Lucas muttered.

"To start with, she insists that four elevators in the main bank in the lobby be reserved exclusively for her guests. They will, she insists, run only from the lobby to the ballroom on the nineteenth floor."

"That will make it very inconvenient for—" Mr. Atterbury began.

"That will be impossible," Chambrun said. "Too many of our regular guests will have to find different routes to reach their rooms."

"Oh, dear!" Reggie Lucas said.

"We will, however, make the elevators in the West wing exclusively available to guests at the ball. The doormen will be instructed to pass this along to people arriving by car or taxi. Jerry," Chambrun went on to Jerry Dodd, "you will have men stationed to guide people, to keep the lobby uncluttered as usual."

"Mrs. Horween will be very distressed," Reggie Lucas said. "Perhaps I can make it clearer by saying she will blow her stack."

"Make a note," Chambrun said to Miss Ruysdale, "that Mr. Lucas tried."

"Thank you, love," Reggie said, smiling at Miss Ruysdale.

"Speaking of elevators," Douglas Muir, the engineer, said. "The number two car going to the roof is out of order." There are only two elevators that go to the penthouses on the roof.

"What's wrong with it?" Chambrun asked.

"If I didn't know better I'd say it was sabotaged," Muir said. He is a big, gray-haired, unsmiling man with a walrus mustache, and is enormously efficient.

Chambrun's eyes narrowed. "But you do know better, Douglas?"

"No way for anyone to get at it unnoticed," Muir said. "A Stilson wrench fell into the clutch mechanism and ripped it to pieces. Take two days to get new parts shipped in from Detroit. But there are only three people on the roof, sir. You, old Mrs. Haven and her dog, and the movie star. One elevator should handle your needs without too much discomfort."

"No strangers in the engine room?" Chambrun asked.

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"Only a safety inspector who checked the whole place out yesterday," Muir said.

"Man you know?"

Muir shook his head. "New man, who seemed to know his stuff, however."

Chambrun nodded and turned to Mr. Lavalle, the ballroom manager. "In the reception room outside the ballroom, Lavalle, there are two bars, one to the right and one to the left as people enter."

"Correct," Lavalle said.

"Beyond that the official reception line is to be set up—Mrs. Horween, the girl, a couple of male relatives. Mrs. Horween wants the order reversed. Reception line first, then the two bars."

"No problem," Lavalle said. "The bars are movable."

"You are overlooking one stage in the procedure, Mr. Chambrun," Reggie Lucas said. "I come first, checking out the guests at the door—examining their teeth for flaws, their bodies for birthmarks. Just to make sure no one who isn't invited gets in. Actually, I will have a check list. The reason for the bars beyond the reception line is that Mrs. Horween would like to be sure people are not smashed before they meet the debutante."

"Not unreasonable," Chambrun said.

"Supper will be served at precisely one o'clock," Chambrun said. "It was originally scheduled for twelve thirty. Mrs. Horween wants it moved back half an hour."

"Which brings me to an unrelated question, Mr. Chambrun," Amato, the banquet manager, said. "Robert Gaynor, in Penthouse Three, has ordered a dinner for two. He wants fresh salmon with sauce Beaumont. It seems he had it here sometime. Unfortunately there is no fresh salmon on the market except half a ton that Mrs. Horween had flown in from the state of Washington. I doubt if she would miss two servings."

"Naughty, naughty!" Reggie Lucas giggled. "You will have to be supersweet to me, Chambrun, or I might tell!"

"On another problem presented by our movie star," Amato said. "He demands a certain brand of Spanish sherry. I can't produce it for him."

Chambrun raised a disapproving eyebrow. "It is my understanding that there is no wine worth serving that we don't have in our cellar."

"That's the difficulty. The sherry Gaynor asks for isn't worth

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serving," Amato said. "It's a cheap cooking sherry no one I can find would consider stocking. But the gentleman insists. This is some kind of anniversary. He and the lady drank this cheap sherry on the occasion they are celebrating. I'm damned if I can find a bottle of it anywhere. I understand they stopped exporting it from Spain about five years ago. No market for it here."

"Do your best," Chambrun said. He sat frowning for a moment, then he went on with a dozen small demands made by Mrs. Horween. He and the others settled them. As far as I could tell, Mrs. Horween had scored on all her major points except the elevators. I do remember that Reggie Lucas was to have a telephone at his elbow as the guests arrived. Any phone calls from anyone, for anyone at the ball, were to be delivered to him.

Miss Veach, the night superintendent on the switchboard, had arranged for Reggie's phone. "Robert Gaynor seems to keep coming up," she said. "He has instructed us to put no calls through to him after seven o'clock tonight. He must be planning quite a celebration with his lady."

The meeting was over, but Chambrun stopped Mr. Atterbury at the door. "Be good enough to send up our folder on Robert Gaynor," he said.

Finally Chambrun, Miss Ruysdale, and I were alone. Reggie Lucas had dashed off to report an almost-victory to Mrs. Horween. Everyone else had gone back to work.

"Speaking of Gaynor," I said. "The lady he's celebrating with tonight is the wife of someone who is a guest in the hotel."

"How do you know?" Chambrun asked.

"He told me. Wanted me to understand why there's so much secrecy and hush-hush about his being here."

"Who is she?" Chambrun asked.

"No idea. That's something he didn't tell me."

"I don't like the feel of the whole thing," Chambrun said slowly.

"She is maybe the five thousandth cheating wife in my time," Ruysdale said. "I know you don't approve, but what's so different about it?"

Chambrun crushed out his flat Egyptian cigarette in the ashtray on his desk. "I don't know. I wish I did," he said.

I make it sound as though Chambrun were playing some kind of hunch, having some kind of psychic premonition. If you knew him as I do, you'd know he played no such games with himself. It

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was hours later before I knew what was bothering him. I found myself too busy to deal with the fragments he never overlooked.

My problem was that in the late afternoon someone on radio tipped Robert Gaynor's presence. The word got out that he was in town, staying at the Beaumont. Excited young girls seemed to appear out of the woodwork and were obviously prepared to camp out in the lobby, waiting for Gaynor to show.

The front desk did their best to persuade these sensation seekers that the story was false, Robert Gaynor wasn't registered at the Beaumont. That was the technical truth. He was "a John Smith," registered under a phony name. Extra precautions were taken by Jerry Dodd and his security people to keep these young people from infiltrating to the upper floors to search for their idol. With only one elevator operating to the roof it was easy enough to keep that car blocked off. I took it on myself around six o'clock to call Gaynor and tell him that the secret was out and that an army of admirers was flooding the place.

"Can you keep them off the roof?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

"Then it doesn't matter—I'm not leaving this penthouse," he said.

"I called you now because I know you're not taking calls after seven o'clock," I said.

"What are you talking about?" he said sharply.

"Your orders to the switchboard," I said.

"I gave no such orders," he said.

Some kind of confusion by one of the switchboard operators, I thought. "I can have the order canceled," I said.

He laughed. "Never mind," he said. "It's not a bad idea."

It didn't occur to him or to me to wonder who could have given the order to the switchboard. We both assumed it was some kind of misunderstanding. Of course, I should have known better. Chambrun's staff doesn't make that kind of mistake.

It was white tie and tails for me and for Chambrun for the night of the ball. I took time to dress after my conversation with Gaynor and was pleased with the results. I went down the hall to Chambrun's office. The first thing I noticed was that he was wearing a black tie with his full-dress suit.

"You put on the wrong tie," I said.

He seemed far away. He glanced at himself in the wall mirror. "So I did," he said.

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"Shall I get you a white tie? I have a spare," I said.

He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a white tie. "I'll be ready when the right time comes," he said. "Who wears a black tie with a dress suit, Mark?"

"A Maitre d', a waiter," I said.

"I am about to become a room-service waiter," he said.

I was not a witness to what happened after that, but when it was all over we got the details from Chambrun. He had put together some of the fragments I've mentioned and he'd anticipated a violence. And he almost prevented it, but not quite.

No one ever questions anything Chambrun does in the hotel, and when he appeared in the kitchen and took over from the room-service waiter who was about to take dinner up to Penthouse Three, no one asked a question. Whatever he chose to do in the Beaumont was law.

I need to explain that there are three ways to reach the roof other than the fire stairs. There are the two elevators in the lobby, one of which was out of order, and there is a service elevator at the back which is used by Room Service and by maids and other personnel at the proper times. The three penthouses are separated at the front by garden space, but they are connected at the rear by a service hallway into which the service elevator opens along with the fire stairs.

Chambrun, a napkin draped over his arm, went up in the service elevator with the wagon that carried Robert Gaynor's dinner—which included some of Mrs. Horween's state of Washington's salmon. At the roof level he ran into a horror that sickened him. Stretched out in the hallway was the body of a girl, brutally beaten around the head—pistol-whipped, he thought. On the room-service's hall phone he called for Jerry Dodd and the house physician, Dr. Partridge. The girl, a total stranger to Chambrun, was still breathing faintly.

He waited for help, cursing himself for not having foreseen this possibility. When the girl was in the doctor's care he gave instructions to Jerry Dodd.

"You're going in there?" Jerry asked, pointing to the back door of Penthouse Three. Chambrun, his face grim, nodded.

"I'm going with you," Jerry said.

"Just handle your orders, Jerry," Chambrun said. "Let us hope I'm not too late."

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With a service key he opened the rear door of Penthouse Three and wheeled in the dinner wagon. He waited in the kitchen area, straining to hear something. He was aware of the scent of an exotic perfume. Then he heard a woman laugh.

"Thank heaven," he said, under his breath.

He wheeled the wagon into the living room. Gaynor had said that when the waiter brought the dinner he was just to leave it and go away. He was not to see who Gaynor's guest was. Chambrun walked to the door that led to the penthouse's bedrooms.

"Gaynor, it's necessary that I talk to you," he called out.

There was no sound from the rooms beyond.

"You will force me to come looking for you," Chambrun said.

Gaynor appeared, his face flushed with anger. "I gave strict instructions—" he began. "Mr. Chambrun!"

"There isn't much time to talk," Chambrun said, in a cold voice. This was the hanging judge.

"Talk about what?" Gaynor asked.

"What you do with your life, or other people's lives, is your affair," Chambrun said. "But *where* you do it is mine."

"Are you taking a moral tone with me, Mr. Chambrun?"

"I don't give a damn about your morals," Chambrun said. "Already you may be responsible for a death. One of your fans, a child almost, has just been found outside the service door here, severely beaten. The person responsible for that is waiting for the proper moment to attack you and your lady."

"Why—for God's sake?"

"Because he has been hired by the lady's husband to eliminate you both. The husband is not one to forgive treachery."

"You're not making sense!" Gaynor said.

"I know a good deal about you, Gaynor. It is my business to know everything there is to know about famous guests. Five years ago you had your first big success, an Italian-made Western movie shot in Spain."

"*The Silver Spurs,*" Gaynor murmured.

"The leading lady in that film was a ravishingly beautiful Irish girl named Kathleen O'Connor. That was her maiden name. She was actually married to a wealthy Spanish businessman named Manuel Santana. He was one of the backers of the film, which is how Kathleen got the job. There were rumors about you and Kathleen at the time, but there are always rumors about romantic leading men and their leading ladies. Today you told Mark

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Haskell, my public-relations man, that your dinner companion was a married woman who is staying here with her husband."

"I wanted him to understand why all the secrecy was necessary," Gaynor said.

"You discreetly didn't mention the lady's name, but there was something you did do, Gaynor. You ordered a cheap Spanish sherry to go with a gourmet dinner."

"Sentimental reasons," Gaynor said.

"I understand. It was a wine you drank when you had your first romance. A very bad wine, I may say, but it revealed the lady's identity to me. Married, with a Spanish background. The only lady married to a Spaniard in the Beaumont was Madame Santana, the former Kathleen O'Connor, your former leading lady. How you got together again, how you arranged this meeting I do not know. But it was slipshod, because Senor Santana became aware of it and set a trap for you."

A beautiful woman appeared behind Gaynor in the doorway. "That is impossible, Mr. Chambrun," Kathleen Santana said. "My husband is in Washington on diplomatic business."

"A perfect alibi for him," Chambrun said, "but it will not interfere with the operation of a hired killer who is, I tell you, just waiting for me to leave before doing his job."

"I can't believe my husband would—" Kathleen said.

"Believe," Chambrun said. "The trap is set, rather elaborately. Yesterday, posing as a safety inspector, this hired killer put one of the two front elevators that come to the roof out of commission. That left only one elevator to watch, to make certain you were in the trap, Mrs. Santana. It also meant that if you changed your plans and decided to dine out somewhere he had only one elevator to cover. He gave instructions to the switchboard that you would accept no phone calls here after seven o'clock. No chance that way that anyone would become concerned by your failure to answer the phone. No one would be sent to check on you at a critical moment."

"But if what you say is true—"

"It is true, and there is no time to waste. Something has already gone wrong—that unfortunate girl in the service hall. He may not wait for me to leave. He can't use the service elevator—the way he came—because the place is swarming with security people. He will have to come here, finish his job, and leave by the one working elevator at the front. You will stop for nothing. You

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will slip out through the kitchen to the service area. My man Dodd will get you out of the hotel, take you anywhere you choose to go."

"But where?" Gaynor asked.

"Your problem, not mine, Gaynor," Chambrun said. "Now move— There is no time!"

The frightened couple took off for the kitchen and their one way of escape. Chambrun went back into the living room. He hesitated a moment, then opened the curtains at the French windows that looked onto the roof. He was clearly visible to anyone out there. Like a perfect waiter he began resetting things on the dinner wagon.

He heard the front door to the penthouse open, but he paid no attention. He kept his back turned. The waiter's napkin was draped over his right hand.

"Where are they?" a harsh voice asked.

Chambrun turned and found himself faced by a grotesque figure wearing a black ski mask. A deadly-looking handgun was aimed straight at "the waiter." Chambrun gave his shoulders a Gallic shrug and nodded toward the bedroom area.

The man in the ski mask evidently thought a waiter could be handled later. He moved quickly across the room toward the bedroom door, stepped inside for a moment, then returned.

"Where have they gone, buster?" he demanded. The hand holding the gun stretched out toward Chambrun who took a step backward, raised his right hand, covered with the napkin, in a defensive gesture. A gunshot blasted the quiet of the room. The man in the ski mask screamed, dropped his gun, and clutched at a shattered elbow.

"Breaking and entering," Chambrun said, in a quiet voice. He dropped the napkin revealing his own gun. "Assault with a deadly weapon on that poor girl, intent to commit several murders. Senor Santana cannot claim diplomatic immunity for you."

The man, clutching his arm, his body twisted in agony, cried out, "Who are you?"

Chambrun's lips moved in a tight smile. "Under this roof, in this hotel, I am supreme ruler," he said.

There was a call to the security office. And then the supreme ruler removed the black tie he was wearing and replaced it with the white one he had in his trouser pocket. The Horween ball was the next thing on his agenda.

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"After a time all was stillness" . . .

THE PLAN OF THE SNAKE

by EDWARD WELLEN

Far out on the veldt one hundred years of weather have scoured and scattered the bones of the Bantu, the Boer, and the snake. If the bones have changed, the pebble half buried amid them has not. The wind and the sun have worked on the pebble, but it is the sun's beam that takes a polish and the wind's glassiness that gets scratched.

When the bones of the Bantu wore flesh, it was the Bantu who found the pebble. The earth in its long travail had worked the pebble to the surface. The pebble winked at the world in vain who knows how long till the Bantu happened by on his hunt for springbok.

The Bantu abandoned the springbok's spoor to answer the blinking call of the pebble. He stood staring down at it, then hunkered and picked it up. The hand holding his assegai went suddenly slick on the weapon's wooden shaft, and the hand cupping the pebble weighed it in wonder.

He had heard of these pebbles and even seen a few, but never in the wildest tales had there been talk of one this size. With it he might, if not cheated, buy a hundred head of breeding cattle, and much land for a kraal, and more than one woman to grow sorghum and children. He laughed at the play of light in his hand, picturing his woman carrying one child strapped to her back while carrying another within.

It was then that the Boer cast his shadow across the Bantu's present and future.

The Bantu closed his hand over the pebble, but it was too late. Turning his head, he knew the Boer had seen the pebble; the pebble's glitter was now in the Boer's eyes.

The Boer, also out hunting, had come upon him while he squatted dreaming. The Boer could stand beyond reach of the assegai's iron tip and speak death from the mouth of his gun.

The Bantu looked at the Boer, knowing the man without ever

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having seen him before. The elders had a saying: "If you refuse to be made straight when you are green, you will not be made straight when you are dry."

The Boer's mouth had the twist of old meanness. And now it spoke soft words that did not hide the crookedness behind them. "Good day, kaffir. Show me the *mooi klip.*"

Unwillingly the Bantu's hand opened to show the Boer the pretty pebble.

The glitter grew in the Boer's eyes. The Bantu's hand closed on the pebble but the light did not go out. The Boer smiled.

"That pebble would make a nice plaything for my child. I will give you my hunting knife for the pebble." The Boer unsheathed his knife to show how it flashed.

The Bantu wrinkled his face in thought, pretending to weigh the offer, then slowly straightened. In pushing himself to his feet he palmed another pebble, a commonplace pebble, and held it in his fist along with the first.

The Boer extended the knife toward the Bantu. "So we see eye to eye. The pebble for the knife."

The Bantu shook his head. "It is a good knife, but I do not wish to trade the pebble."

The Boer slid the knife home in its sheath. "Then it is an even better bargain. I will have the pebble for nothing. Hand it over, kaffir." The Boer raised the gun so that the mouth looked at the Bantu.

The Bantu gestured around at the veldt with his closed fist. "The pebble belongs to the earth."

The Boer's mouth tightened and the gun's mouth grew perfectly round. "The pebble belongs to me."

The Bantu half opened his fist as though to give in. Then, while his two smallest fingers held the *mooi klip* fast, the other fingers flung the commonplace pebble spinning far. He made his voice shake with rage rather than fear. "If it is yours find it, as I found it."

The Boer's gaze followed the false flight and the gun's mouth dropped.

The Bantu whirled and ran. He remembered a dip in the earth along the back trail. But before the Bantu reached the dip and sank out of sight the Boer had seen through the trick.

The gun spoke.

So swift was the gun's word that it seemed to the Bantu his

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flesh heard the gun before his ears. A blow as from a flinty fist struck fire in his side.

Then he was slipping and sliding over the lip of the hollow. He lost his footing and rolled over roughness to the bottom, where dry grass grew and here and there a sizable boulder sunned itself.

He lay half stunned, half catching his breath. Plucking at his breath's raggedness only raveled it more. He did not want to look at the hole in his side but he looked. He was losing much blood.

To have any time at all, the Bantu knew he must haul himself behind a boulder before the Boer appeared at the rim of the Bantu's barren little world. He heard the Boer's shout of rage as he found strength to plug the hole with grass to leave no trail of blood and found will to make for the nearest boulder, the pebble digging into his palm as he thrust himself along.

Rounding the boulder, the Bantu began to stretch his own length and the assegai's in the boulder's grudging wedge of shadow, then saw he shared the shade with a snake.

The snake's tongue flickered.

The Bantu's mouth pulled against pain in a smile. "Snake, do not waste your poison. I am already dead."

But the snake did not listen. It coiled to strike.

The Bantu struck first. The assegai spitted the snake and the snake writhed and died.

The Boer's voice broke into the Bantu's world. "Kaffir, I know you are down there. You cannot hide from me or outrun my gun. Show yourself and give me the pebble and I will let you go."

The Bantu tightened his hold on the pebble and smiled at the hurt. The Boer did not have the pebble yet.

But neither was there anywhere to hide the pebble from the Boer. If the Bantu scrabbled a hole, the Boer would spot the digging. If the Bantu cast the pebble away, the Boer would never leave this cup of earth till he had found it.

The Bantu eyed the snake. "Where, oh, snake?"

And the dead snake answered silently.

The Bantu laughed. "Thank you, oh, snake."

He weighed the pebble on his palm. It looked too big to go down but the Bantu made one last scan of it, put it in his mouth, and swallowed.

The pebble started down, then stuck in his windpipe, blocking all air. The Bantu's eyes bulged and his throat convulsed. Then the pebble worked its way and went down.

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Sooner or later the Boer would know the Bantu had swallowed the pebble and would slit his belly and writhe searching fingers through his slippery guts. The Bantu put his hands over the grass plug. For this plan of the snake's to work, the Bantu had to hold himself together and hang on to life till the Boer found him.

To hasten the Boer's coming, the Bantu twisted so that his feet left the boulder's shade. The Boer would see the movement.

Drumbeat of death, the Boer's boots trampled dry grass.

Carefully the Boer rounded the boulder. In a sweep the Boer's glance took in the Bantu and the spitted snake.

The Bantu looked up at the shimmer of heat that was the Boer. He let his hands fall from the wound.

The Boer looked down. The Bantu's hands lay open and empty. Fresh blood loosened the grass plug from blood that had crusted around the wound and the Boer saw the Bantu had not stuffed the pebble in the wound. The ground ringing the boulder showed no smoothing over. With his foot the Boer rolled the Bantu wound side down. The Bantu's body had not been hiding anything. The Boer rolled the Bantu back with his foot.

He prodded the Bantu with the mouth of the gun. "Where is the *mooi klip*? If you have swallowed it and cannot cough it up I will take my hunting knife and slit your belly."

The Bantu pointed to the snake. Trying to hide the rawness of his throat, he spoke. "What you seek is in the snake's mouth."

The Boer narrowed his eyes. "Kaffir, if you are lying, you are just putting off your belly-slitting a little and adding to my anger a lot."

The Bantu only steadied his pointing finger. "What you seek is in the snake's mouth."

The Boer hesitated but a moment. After all, the kaffir lay helpless, eyes glazing, and the snake lay dead. The Boer leaned his gun against the boulder and knelt to probe the snake's mouth.

Reptiles have lasting reflexes. Even dead, a freshly killed snake will sink its fangs into probing flesh.

The Boer cried out.

After a time all was stillness.

And all is stillness still, but for the wind through the bones.

"Q"

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"You played a great game, the finest of your career. And then you disappeared, you quit cold . . . I want to know why" . . .

REBOUND

by BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

The last time I had seen Alex Rolfe was 21 years ago at the old Madison Square Garden at 49th Street and Eighth Avenue, in what was once called the heart of Manhattan.

That night, with the Continental Basketball Association championship series between the New York Sabers and the Chicago Wildcats tied at three games apiece, Rolfe had come into the last quarter of the seventh game when the Wildcats' first-string center twisted an already tender ankle. And he had scored 18 points in ten minutes on a remarkable assortment of fadeaway jumpers and hook shots and reverse layups, had blocked five shots, had taken down eight rebounds, and had, unusual for a big man, twice forced turnovers on pressure defense. As a result, the Wildcats had wiped out a 13-point Sabers lead and on the strength of Rolfe's last-second tip-in sent the game into overtime.

In the five-minute extra period he had blocked two more shots, grabbed off another four rebounds, and scored all 14 of the Wildcats' points. The final score was 109-100, Chicago. His teammates had surrounded him after the buzzer and half carried him off the court, not a small accomplishment considering that Alex Rolfe was six-nine and weighed in the neighborhood of 270 pounds.

He was 27 then, born on September 12, 1930 according to the program, and in his fifth season in the CBA. He had kicked around quite a bit; the Wildcats were his fourth team. He'd been a competent center in college, but the faster and more intricate patterns of professional basketball seemed to have confused him. Or they had until that one game, that one brilliant performance.

The next day all the New York papers, including the *Telegram* and *Journal-American* and *Daily Mirror* of sainted memory, had been filled with interviews and suggestions by a couple of columnists that Rolfe might be on the verge of realizing his full poten-

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tial. I remember one particularly effusive writer suggesting that he might even become another George Mikan. My own write-up of the game—in those days I had covered the Sabers for the *Herald-Tribune*, also of sainted memory—had been a bit more restrained. There was no denying what Rolfe had accomplished, or of its impact on professional basketball in that era, but the Sabers were my team and he had almost singlehandedly taken what would have been their first championship away from them.

As things turned out, though, that game was to be Rolfe's last. The day after it was over he literally disappeared from sight, never to be heard from again. No one seemed to know where he'd gone, or why—not even the management of the Wildcats—and he failed to show up when training camp opened the following season. There were a few "Whatever happened to Alex Rolfe?" stories that summer and during the next year, but after that most people forgot about him and about that glorious night in the Garden. Yesterday's sports heroes are always quickly forgotten. It's the heroes of today who get the ink and the adulation.

Now, 21 years later, Alex Rolfe was just a name in the yellowing pages of newspapers and sports magazines and record books. The old CBA was gone; all its great players were retired or coaching obscurely at the high-school or small-college level and just as forgotten as Rolfe himself. Professional basketball had entered a new and different age, a better age in a lot of ways. The high and low points of its past were little more than dim memories.

But some people still remembered, and I was one of them. Even after two decades I remembered that night in the Garden and I remembered Alex Rolfe and what he'd done. Rolfe had become something of an obsession with me over the years. The thing was, I thought I knew why he had vanished so suddenly and so completely, and I wanted to find him and talk to him about it. And the thing was, too, that his performance against the Sabers in 1957 had marked a turning point in my own life.

I had been young and ambitious in those days, on my way to the top, I thought; but my life and my career hadn't quite worked out the way I'd always believed they would. In 1958 I had lost my job with the *Herald-Tribune*, for internal reasons that weren't my fault, and I had also lost my wife in the divorce courts for domestic reasons that may or may not have been my fault. After that, my life and my career had settled into mediocrity—a succession of jobs with minor newspapers, a few freelance articles for second-

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string sports magazines, two sports biographies that hadn't sold well, too many sessions with the bottle, and too many loveless affairs. My own dim memories of the past were all I had left now. Memories of the way it had been in the old days in New York, covering the Sabers and dreaming of wealth and fame. Memories of men like Alex Rolfe.

Off and on for the past 20 years I had spent time and energy trying to locate him, without success. Then, three days ago, the paper I was working for in Dayton had taken on a sports reporter whose last job was in Madison, Wisconsin. This reporter and I had gone out for a drink, and talk had turned to basketball, and Rolfe's name had come up. And it turned out that the reporter knew of Rolfe, knew where he was living—in a small village in upstate Wisconsin, where he owned a tavern. The reporter had wanted to do a feature on him a year or so ago, but Rolfe had been uncooperative, saying that he didn't want any publicity; the reporter hadn't pursued the matter.

I had gotten on the phone immediately, dug up an address and number for Rolfe in the village of Harbor Lake, and then called the number. When I got through to Rolfe I explained that I was writing a series of articles on basketball players of the fifties for a national sports magazine and did he remember my name? He was silent for several seconds; then he said yes, he remembered me, but he didn't want to be interviewed and besides, I had to be scraping the bottom of the barrel if I wanted to do a story on him. I reminded him of the championship game in the Garden and told him the magazine had given me *carte blanche*, write up anyone I cared to, not necessarily the stars but the journeymen players who had had moments of greatness in the past.

He still didn't want to see me. I said I was going to be in Wisconsin anyway to talk to another old player and that I intended to drop in on him; said I was going to write about the Sabers-Wildcats title game with or without an interview. He told me it was my privilege to write whatever I felt like writing, and hung up on me.

The next day I took a leave of absence from the paper, got into my car, and headed north to Wisconsin.

And now, two days and 800 miles later, I had arrived in Harbor Lake. It wasn't much of a town, just a few scattered houses along a small tree-rimmed lake and half a dozen stores along a one-block main street. Quiet, sleepy, off the beaten track. It was a lit-

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tle past four p.m. as I drove through it, looking for the Harbor Lake Tavern. The leaden sky forecast rain, but there was nothing on the windshield of my car except streaks of dirt that gave the buildings and the gray-looking lake water a vaguely distorted appearance.

Rolfe's tavern turned out to be on the far side of the village, tucked back near the water's edge. It was a small weathered building with a rustic façade, shaded by pines; no neon sign or electric beer advertisements, nothing to tell you it was a bar except for the neatly painted wooden sign above the door that spelled out its name. I imagined that he did most of his business at night, even during these late spring months; there was only one other car on the gravel parking lot besides mine when I shut off the engine and went inside.

The car must have belonged to Rolfe himself because he was the only one in the place. He stood behind the plank, slicing lemons and limes into wedges. A man six-nine in his twenties is imposing, but in his forties he angles toward a question mark. There were heavy lines in his cheeks and a kind of melancholy in his expression, and when he came down to the stool I had taken he walked with a pronounced limp, as if he were suffering from arthritis. He looked old and tired—the same way my reflection looked in the backbar mirror. The years hadn't been good to him either.

He asked me what I'd have, and I told him a double Scotch and soda and watched him build it. When he set the glass down in front of me I said, "You don't recognize me, do you, Rolfe?"

He stared at me, searching his memory, and after a time I saw recognition seep into his eyes. His body stiffened a little; the fingers of both hands curled into fists, relaxed, curled again, relaxed again. "Joe Brady," he said.

"That's right. Joe Brady."

"I told you I didn't want to see you."

"I'm here, Rolfe, like it or not."

"I don't want to talk about the past."

"No? Why not?"

"Because it's dead. Dead and buried. I haven't thought about basketball in years."

"Haven't you?" I said.

Emotion flickered across his face; he looked away from me, through a window at the rear that framed a view of the lake. His

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hands curled into fists again. "Just what do you want from me, Brady?"

"An interview. A story."

"I don't have a story for you."

"I think you do."

His eyes shifted back to mine. "It's been twenty-one years since that game in the Garden," he said. "Nobody cares any more. Nobody remembers."

"I care. I remember."

"Why?"

"You played a great game, the finest game of your career. And then you disappeared, you quit cold."

"And you want to know why."

I nodded.

He didn't say anything for a time. His eyes took on a remoteness, as if he were looking backward into the past. It was quiet in there, hushed except for the faint whirring of the refrigeration unit. From outside, over the lake, I thought I could hear the distant sheetmetal rumble of thunder.

Rolfe blinked finally and the remoteness was gone. "All right," he said. "I left basketball after that game because it *was* the finest of my career. I figured I'd never have another one like it; it was a fluke and I was a second-string center and always would be. Not many mediocre pro athletes have great games and not many have the sense to get out if they do. I had a chance to quit a hero, a champion, and I took it. That's all."

"Is it?" I drank some of my Scotch and soda. "Tell me about the game, Rolfe."

"Tell you about it? You were there."

"Sure. But I want to hear your version of it, everything you remember. The fourth quarter, coming off the bench, scoring the eighteen points—start with that."

"The shots I took went in. I was lucky."

"You weren't lucky, you were inspired. You made moves and shots you'd never even tried before. Remember the fourteen points in overtime? Remember the fadeaway jumpers you made with three men on you that hit nothing but net?"

"No," Rolfe said, "I don't remember."

"Sure you do. You remember every point of it. Every footfall on the floor, every move and rebound and blocked shot, who was guarding you each time you scored."

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He shook his head. Kept on shaking it.

"There's something else you remember, too. The most important thing of all about that game."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about point-shaving, Rolfe," I said. "I'm talking about criminal collusion with the gambling syndicates in New York and Chicago."

Something seemed to break deep inside him; his body lost its stiffness, seemed to shrink in on itself. His eyes turned cloudy with pain.

"Lots of point-shaving in those days," I said. "Mostly in the college ranks but there was talk that it was going on in the pros too. Vague rumors that the gamblers got to you and Donovan, the Wildcats' shooting guard; I heard them and so did a couple of other reporters, but not until weeks after the game and then we couldn't find enough proof to break the story.

"Point spread was Sabers plus five and you and Donovan were supposed to make sure the Wildcats didn't beat that spread because there was heavy syndicate money on the Sabers. Help win the game if you could but not by more than four points; if the Wildcats built up a lead of six or better, then the two of you were to purposely miss shots, make a turnover or two, do whatever you could to get the margin down to less than five.

"Donovan delivered—he tried his damnedest to keep you from scoring all those points in overtime; but you played the best basketball of your life and crossed up the gamblers and blew the spread. Isn't that the way it was?"

He turned away from me, limped over to the backbar, picked up a bottle of bourbon, came back, poured a triple shot, and drank it neat. I watched him shudder. "I knew something like this would happen," he said thickly, talking more to himself than to me. "Twenty-one years, but I knew it would come out some day."

"So you're not going to deny it."

He let out a heavy sighing breath. "Look at me," he said. "You know it's the truth, you can see that it is."

I was looking at him, all right. I'd thought that if this moment of confrontation ever came, I would feel something—hatred for him, a kind of perverse satisfaction. But I felt nothing. Too many years had passed since that night in 1957. Too many years.

"What I want to know is why," I said. "Why did you sell out to the gamblers and then double-cross them? A change of heart, is

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that it? They got to you in a weak moment, tempted you, and you couldn't go through with it when the time came? The honest man triumphant?"

Anguish made the lines in Rolfe's face look as deep as incisions. "I wish to God that was the way it was," he said. "I'd still be something of a hero then, wouldn't I? I'd still be able to live with myself. But it wasn't like that at all."

"How was it, then?"

No response at first. Thunder rumbled again over the lake, closer this time; a gust of wind rattled the tavern's front door and window.

"I was a wild kid in those days," Rolfe said abruptly. "I didn't give a damn about much of anything except fast cars, fast women, and big money. I got in with the gamblers and I lost $6,000 to them on the horses and playing high-stakes poker, and I couldn't pay off my markers. So it was agree to shave points in the championship game or get my legs broken with a baseball bat. I agreed; I was eager as hell to agree. I went out there that night with every intention of doing what I was told to do."

"So why didn't you?"

"Because whatever else I was, I was also a basketball player. I loved the game, I'd always wanted to play it the way the best did. Only I just wasn't good enough—a big slow reserve center who was lucky to be in a professional uniform. I'd had some good games in college and in the pros, but nothing outstanding, nothing that even came close to real excellence. Except that night, that one night. I went into the game in the fourth quarter and it was all there: the moves, the shots, the *excellence*. You understand, Brady? For the first time in my life it was all there."

I felt a little shiver along the saddle of my back. "Yeah," I said, "I understand."

"I couldn't do anything wrong. I couldn't even *make* myself do anything wrong. It was like I was drunk on basketball; all I could think about was the game, making the moves, making the shots, doing all the things I'd always wanted to do but had never been able to do. Nothing else mattered; there wasn't anything else." Rolfe swallowed heavily. There was sweat on his face now. "It wasn't until the game was over that I realized I'd blown the point spread. That I realized what that one great game, those few minutes of real excellence, was going to cost me."

I let out a breath. "What happened with the gamblers?"

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"What do you think happened?" he said. His mouth twisted bitterly. "They did what they'd warned me they would do. They broke both my legs with a baseball bat."

There wasn't anything to say. I picked up my drink and finished it.

"I didn't go back to Chicago after the game," Rolfe said. "I ran instead—packed up my things at the hotel and bought a cheap car and drove out here to Wisconsin. A couple of weeks later I got in touch with the Wildcats and had them send my share of the championship money to a bank in Madison; I used that and borrowed the rest to pay off the $6,000 I owed the gamblers.

"But it wasn't any use and I knew it. They found me inside of a month. One of them visited me in the county hospital afterward and told me I was through playing basketball. I knew that too. But he could have saved himself the trouble because my right leg never did heal properly; that's why I walk with a limp. I've got that limp to remind me of my one great game every time I take a step. Every step for the past twenty-one years.

"But that's not the worst of it. Waiting all these years for someone like you to come along, listening for footsteps out of the past—that's not the worst of it either. The worst of it was all the years of wondering if that game really was a fluke or if the moves and the shots and the excellence would have been there for me in other games; if I could have *been* great some day. I'll never know, Brady. I'll never know."

Outside, rain began to fall; I could hear it drumming against the roof of the tavern. The day had turned dark—but no darker than it was in here, or than it was inside Alex Rolfe.

He ran a hand across his face, as if to wipe away emotion as well as sweat. When he took the hand away his expression was weary and resigned. "So now you know the whole story," he said. "Go ahead and write it if you want. I just don't care any more."

"I'm not going to write it," I said.

He stared at me as I got off my stool. "That's why you came here, isn't it? To get the truth so you could tell the world what happened back in 1957?"

"Maybe it is. But I'm still not going to write the story. It's something that happened twenty-one years ago; nobody cares any more, nobody remembers—you were right about that. Except you and me, and we've both got to keep on living with ourselves."

I turned my back on him because I didn't want to watch his

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reaction, didn't want to look at him any longer, and hurried to the door and out into the warm spring rain.

But in my car, on the way back through the village, the image of Rolfe's face remained sharp in my mind. Full of guilt, that face, full of torment and loss. Full of all the same things as that other face, the familiar one in the backbar mirror.

I had come to Harbor Lake to confront Rolfe with the truth, yes; but I had not sought him out for the sake of justice, not planned to write the real story behind the CBA championship game for public-spirited reasons. I had done it instead for the sole purpose of making him pay, even after all these years, for what I'd convinced myself he had done to me.

Because I had not, as I'd told him, found out about the point-shaving weeks after the game. I had found out about it the day *before* the game, through a personal contact in the gambling syndicate. And instead of breaking the story, blowing the lid off the whole sordid affair, I had in my greed and foolishness withdrawn my wife's and my entire savings of $8,000 and bet it all on the New York Sabers.

Yet it was not Rolfe who had cost me my savings, and as a result my marriage; it was me who had lost them, me who had robbed myself. I could fully admit that now, after all this time. I was no better than Rolfe; we were two of a kind. Just as he had had his moment of greatness in 1957, so I had had my moment. Just as he had fallen from grace because of one terrible mistake, and lost a career full of promise and a chance for fulfillment, so had I.

Alex Rolfe had lived in his own private hell for 21 years; he would go on living in it for the rest of his life.

And so would I in mine.

"Q"

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a *NEW* cop story by

THOMAS WALSH

The Captain had it made. He had put in his time, he had everything in God's world—plenty of money, good health—everything he wanted. He could get out of the department while he still had many good years ahead of him. But there was a question that haunted him: Was he his own man? Or had he sold out? What about his manhood, his reason for living, his pride? . . . One of Thomas Walsh's most probing and perceptive studies of a policeman's lot—the story of Captain Anthony Vincent Flanagan and that first fragment—"you never knew what was really being asked of you the first time" . . .

PAUL BRODERICK'S MAN

by ***THOMAS WALSH***

Flanagan was warned in good time. Which meant, following Paul Broderick's advice, that he was not stupid enough to retire abruptly on the pension. At such a time that action would have been markedly suspicious, and so, in its place, a police-doctor friend of Broderick's put it down that because of a bad back Captain Anthony Vincent Flanagan was granted a necessary period of sick leave.

There were no hitches or awkward moments. There never were, with Paul Broderick handling things. True enough, half a dozen men were questioned later by a Grand Jury, but they were all pretty small fish, as is usual in such matters, and in the end the investigation fizzled out with nothing changed. Captain Flanagan, of course, was unable to testify: medical reasons. The bad back confined him on strict bed rest to an upstate sanatarium, and there he remained, again on Broderick's advice, until after the election in the fall.

And after that there was nothing at all for Flanagan to worry

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about. He had it made. A widower with four grown children, he sold the old brick house in Bay Ridge where he had raised them all, bought himself a fine new $12,000 car, and rented a small but elegantly luxurious apartment in the East Seventies. His son Frank, the doctor, was set up in an impressive midtown office; Flanagan bought a fine new house up in Westchester, cash on the barrelhead, for his daughter Mamie and her family; and Paul Broderick, who always knew the right people, just as he had known where to locate an obliging police doctor, enrolled Flanagan's younger son Jerry in what was reputed to be the best law school in the country.

The only child for whom he was not permitted to buy anything was his other daughter Maureen. Damned queer notions of life, that one. There were times, Flanagan thought grimly, when it seemed to him that about all she was suited for was the convent.

"But I really don't want anything," she tried to excuse herself when Flanagan asked her straight out. "Jack and I have everything we need, Papa. Don't worry about us."

"Have you now?" Flanagan demanded, his lips tightening noticeably. "Well, well, well. Isn't that just wonderful? Everything you need: a satisfied woman. You don't even want a check from me, then?"

"Nothing at all, sir," the husband chimed in; the damned stick of a social worker, whatever the hell they were, up in East Harlem. "But thank you very much."

Maureen, who knew Flanagan much better than her husband did, tried to pass it off lightly.

"Now don't get all huffy," she said. "Don't be that silly, Papa. All we mean—"

"Maybe I know what you mean," Flanagan said, turning his back curtly. "So don't bother explaining yourself. Good day to you both."

Yet the incident irritated him more than was sensible on his part. He had always been an extremely practical man, with very little patience for fine, sensitive consciences; but Maureen, after all, had always been his favorite, the very image of her dead mother.

But after that day, whenever they met at Mamie's house for Sunday dinner, or at Frank's, there was nothing at all of the old closeness between them—and that was more due to Flanagan himself, he had to admit, than to Maureen. In certain matters

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Flanagan had long been aware that he had the pride of the devil in him.

All right, then. Why bother his head about anyone now, even Maureen? He had everything in the world. No money worries; damned good health for his age; the finest of food and drink; and a drawerful of medals and commendations for meritorious police work. There was no one who could say a word about Flanagan, at least not openly. So right after Christmas, still on sick leave, he went to Florida for the winter. Very pleasant, too. Fine sunny weather; breakfast at poolside every day—lamb chops, hashed brown potatoes, and imported Canadian ale, or grilled kidneys and one or two Bloody Marys; and in the afternoons friends to be met, his or Broderick's, at the $50 Clubhouse window in Gulfstream Park.

Yes, Maureen would learn about life one day. The answer might be that he had always made things a little too easy for her. She had never been forced to fight her way up out of the dirt the way her father had; to see when an opportunity presented itself and to have brains enough to grab hold of it. But the hurt remained in him, deep down, and when her first child was born that spring, even though she named it Anthony after him, he went to see it one day when Frank took him, but never bought it a present of any kind—not a toy, not a feeding cup, not a rattle. Flanagan had never been a forgiving man. He had been struck to the heart once, and for no reason; he did not intend to place himself in that vulnerable a position ever again.

But one night not long afterward, in a well-known Third Avenue bar, he got himself into a tussle. There was a drunk who kept pushing at him, to get his place, and when Flanagan jabbed a resentful elbow into the man's side, the drunk muttered something to the tart with him.

Flanagan did not actually hear the remark, and yet he knew what it was; there was something about the drunk's sly contemptuous smile that informed Flanagan. So he yanked the drunk around, slapped him back and forth across the mouth, and pitched him headlong into the nearest wall.

Joe Martin, Mamie's husband, was much amused by that at the next family dinner.

"You'd better watch out," he grinned, "or they'll be throwing you into the ring with Muhammed Ali one of these days. I hear you knocked out three of his teeth. What did you hit the guy for

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anyway, Pop? What did he say to you?"

"What could he say?" Flanagan said, with a certain cold dangerous note in his voice. "Let's have your opinion, Joe. What do you think? What would you suggest, eh?"

"Oh, who cares?" Maureen said, moving behind him and putting both hands on his shoulders; so she knew, of course, and a lot quicker than any of them. "I wouldn't pay any attention to people like that, Papa. They simply don't know what they're talking about. When are you ever going to come up to the Bronx and see the baby again?"

So he did go up there a few days later and solemnly permitted little Anthony to curl a tiny paw around big Anthony's finger. But something had changed. It was a very effortful evening both for him and for Maureen. There fell long silences, and when they talked it seemed to Flanagan it was always about something that neither of them was thinking about.

He felt unaccountably depressed when he got home, whatever the reason might have been, and decided to have a drink for himself. In the end, however, it was more than one, and he woke up at four in the morning, very drunk, and still in his clothes, sitting up in the easy chair and with the television still blaring away.

He had never been much of a drinker before. Now he was. When fall came he had got into the habit of taking his first drink of the day even before breakfast, and had to buy three or four new suits for himself. The old ones had got too small around the waist. Always a trim, leanly built man, in good hard fettle, it shocked him to discover that he had put on something like 30 pounds.

Have to do something, Flanagan decided; time to get hold of myself. He must have forgotten who he was—a police captain, a respected police captain named Anthony Vincent Flanagan. There was no one who told him what to do. He told them. Yet, if that were true, why had he avoided facing up to Paul Broderick for month after month now? He was not afraid, surely; not Captain Flanagan. Then, damn it to hell, why was he letting it go on and on?

So next morning he shaved and dressed very carefully, had nothing to drink, and took a cab downtown to Broderick's office.

And with the old iron toughness and independence stiffening his back, he was the old Flanagan that day, blunt and forceful as a rifle bullet.

"I'll tell you what I came to see you about," he announced, as

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soon as they had shaken hands and sat down. "I'd like my job back. I'd say it's about time, Paul. Will you see to it, then? I'm still on the sick leave, you know."

"Thought you were enjoying yourself," Broderick murmured gently, pushing his fine Cuban cigars over. "Don't know any reason why you wouldn't be. You're a very lucky man, Anthony. You're a man who started out with nothing at all and who's got himself everything in the world now. Just think it over a little. You've put your time in. Get out on the pension. What's to prevent?"

"At my age?" Flanagan demanded, sitting forward an inch. "No, no, Paul. There's a year or two yet until I hit fifty. I don't care for the job itself, you understand. It's a dog's life, and I hate it. But I want to stop this loose talk that's going around concerning me. It's getting a bit bothersome. Even my own daughter Maureen seems to think—but of course that's no matter. I just want the job again. It's all I'm fitted for. So give me the plain answer, Paul. Yes or no?"

Broderick, sitting very low in the leather desk chair, did not look at Flanagan. He looked at the long cigar in his fingers.

"Then I'm sorry," he said at last, raising world-weary and palely untouchable blue eyes. "It's no, Anthony. It has to be. You're well out of it now, and I'd say you're a lot better off that way. I managed to smooth it out for all of us, or for most of us, but it was a damned close thing. I can see no point at all in stirring it up again. There's another Grand Jury in session now and they might get just a little curious as to why your back trouble came up at such a convenient time last year—convenient for you and for me, at any rate. Why risk that? Don't you see what a fool's game it would be?"

"Yes, I do see," Flanagan heard himself gritting. "At least I see what a damned fool I was. Don't forget that I could have come back and talked about that construction contract we each had a piece of—and if I had, there was no one in God's world who could have kept even you out of the box."

"True enough," Broderick agreed, nodding tranquilly. "We'd have gone down the drain, all right, the whole shooting match—and you with us."

The flesh under Flanagan's eyes darkened. Again he leaned forward, his big fist clenching itself tightly on the desk blotter.

"I'm telling you to fix it for me!" he declared thickly. "I'm owed

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that! I was a damned good police officer before I ever met up with you, but you ran the whole department then from behind the curtain—and you still do. To get on in the department I had to do what you asked me—or else I had to get out. Now is that true as the Book, or isn't it?"

"As far as it goes," Broderick admitted. "But you've forgotten one thing. For what you did for me you were paid—and paid damned well. We did business for a long time, and very satisfactory business. I understand you're worth something like three-quarters of a million dollars now. A great saver on your police salary, weren't you?"

"And if I am"—but with his voice beginning to shake—"how much are you worth? With your cab companies and your plumbing supply houses and your building construction firms? And with every one of them having first say on any city contract that ever comes up? I'm not denying that I did what I did. I'd have been the fool of the world to turn my back on the thing. But—"

"Yes, you would have been," Broderick agreed calmly once more. "But remember, Anthony, you made your own decision. Nobody forced you. Think of that for a moment, and don't stand there shouting at me in my own office like a mad bull. I won't have it. You're not your own man any more, and you haven't been for a good many years. You're Paul Broderick's man, and you'll do as you're told here, as you always have. Is that quite clear now?"

"Me?" Flanagan said, on his feet suddenly and gripping the edge of the desk with both hands. "Is that it? Your man, am I? A Broderick office boy, to fetch and carry for you? Well, by God—"

He moved so abruptly that he knocked over the inkwell. Broderick clicked his tongue and rang for the girl.

"My fine rug," he mourned. "Damn it, Anthony, what the hell is the matter with you? I'll never get that spot out of it now. Come back and see me again when you've thought out this business. I'll put you down for lunch at the club next Tuesday. And then we'll—"

But Flanagan, shoving the girl to one side, had lunged out through the office doorway. Down in the street a flood of bright summer sunshine burst over him, but had he come down in the elevator moments ago or had he walked? It was impossible for him to remember. Broderick's man! Not Flanagan's man, not for years now—never Flanagan's man. But Broderick's. Was that true? Could it be true?

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In the $12,000 car he sat motionless, trying to decide on the answer. Only there was a numbed thickness in his head, presenting to him not steady and consecutive reasoning, but scraps and fragments. You never knew what was really being asked of you the first time—that was one fragment. You were only a sergeant then, and a man came around to the precinct house shortly before Christmas with his overcoat pockets full of envelopes. An envelope for the sergeant, an envelope for the lieutenant, an envelope for the captain, and all with Season's Greetings from Paul Broderick. So you had taken your envelope, as the others had taken theirs, and from then on, wherever Broderick's big black Cadillac was left parked, you looked out for it.

Soon it was "Good morning, Mr. Broderick, sir," to the great man, and then it was a couple of tickets pressed into your hand for the next Yankee game at the Stadium, or the Ranger game that night at the Garden. Mr. Broderick liked your style, he said, and one day, when he noticed a dent in your old jalopy, he had one of his men take it downtown to his taxicab garage. Might as well let them hammer that dent out, you were told, only when you got the car back the next day, they had repainted the whole thing. They had also put in new slipcovers and an expensive FM radio and substituted whitewall tires. They had tuned the motor and put in new sparkplugs, a new air filter, and a new fly belt. The old jalopy ran like a charm and looked like a new car.

"Just between us," Broderick had said, "I like your style, Anthony. You've got a good level head on your shoulders, and you've done me many a favor. What's holding your name up on the lieutenants' list? I think I'd better find out about that. I'll let you know in a few days. The bill for your car? What bill? What are you talking about? Favor for favor, that's all. I've got a friend at court now, and so do you. So let's keep it that way, eh? How was the game last night?"

And it had been kept that way. After that there had always been a friend at court for Mr. Broderick in times of need, and also, since Sergeant Flanagan made lieutenant in another month, the fair exchange had been no robbery. Now and again a stock tip, always a good stock tip; later on a chance to buy in as a silent partner in one of the Broderick Construction firms a few days before it landed a $38,000,000 city contract; but never even the hint of Broderick's man, or not until today.

But today, if you had never realized it before, or had insisted

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stubbornly to yourself that you didn't realize it, the thing had come out in plain words, the plainest possible. Not his own man, Flanagan remembered—and not for years. Was it possible? And at last, forcing himself to look back, he saw that it was not only possible, it was true.

He drove home with that queer numbness still inside his head, parked his car in the apartment-house garage, went upstairs, and began to drink. He drank steadily for eight days, the first time in his life, and came out of it to find himself in a private hospital suffering from acute alcoholism, with Maureen crying beside him and holding his hand.

And that shamed him. When he was permitted home again, he emptied every bottle of whiskey in the place, and to get through the hours of the day in one fashion or another forced himself to take long walks, even late-at-night walks, on the many occasions when he could not sleep. Broderick's man? Never! Not if he fought it out now. There was a way back for him. He had only to find the right door, wherever it was. Now he knew. Now he could understand how true were those couple of lines from Omar Khayyam. How did they go?

"I wonder often what the Vintners buy
One half so precious as the stuff they sell."

And what had Anthony Vincent Flanagan sold? Himself? His work, his manhood, his pride, his reason for living? He knew now, and had to find the way back. There must still be a chance to start all over again for himself, to re-shape his life. That was all he had left now, and it was necessary to hold fast to it. The way back existed. But where could he find it? Precisely where had he left it behind him?

He did not know. He had to search. So sometimes very late at night he walked desolate and deserted areas along the river, in the same district that Captain Flanagan had once held in the palm of his hand, with a power almost of life and death over it. The dark alleys; the gloomy warehouse walls on each side; the high coldly indifferent street lamps; the sneaking wind-driven shadows. What did Captain Flanagan expect there? What was he looking for? But still he knew, somehow or other. Patience, it came to him. He had been a man in those days and he would be again. Here was the way back—right here waiting for him. Only where and when?

On the night he found out he had stopped briefly to rest, look-

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ing out over the river, when a prowl car pulled in to the curb beside him.

"Hey, old-timer," a voice said out of the passenger side. "What are you doing in this neighborhood night after night? It's a hell of a section to get mugged in, in case you don't know. What's your name, Pop? Where do you live? Just come over here to the car now and speak up. You've got us interested. We've been watching you every night for the past week."

"Where do I live?" Flanagan repeated. "Not around here. How are you, Boudreau? How have you been, Mahoney?"

Boudreau got out of the car at that, peering more closely.

"Gee," he said then. "Captain Flanagan! But you got so old-looking—or—I mean—well, I just didn't happen to recognize you, Captain, not with your back turned. How you been, Captain? Can we give you a lift someplace? Where you headed for?"

But Captain Flanagan did not know that himself. He got into the prowl car, however, and all at once he seemed to be back in time about 20 years or more. This car might have been the same car he had known then, and it might have been a patrolman named Flanagan who was back of the steering wheel, not Harry Mahoney; just as it might have been Flanagan's partner Bert Bailey in the passenger seat, not Phil Boudreau. Flanagan and Bailey had been partners then, but there came a time when only Flanagan had come back from another spell of night duty.

They had chanced upon a liquor-store holdup in East Seventy-ninth Street. A night much like this, Flanagan remembered, with the same kind of clear lazy rain trickling down the car windows, and then, beyond it, three men suddenly bursting out of the liquor store with their guns waving. Bailey, always the quicker of them, was out at once, shouting the necessary warning; but it had been an unheeded warning, and even yet Flanagan could see the sudden tiny spurt of flame over there in the liquor-store doorway. The bullet had knocked Bailey back onto the car, spinning him around on it, and Flanagan could see again the sudden surprised look on his face, the kind of frightened and realizing half smile that had followed it. Bailey had touched himself on the chest, then looked at his hand. The smile had wavered.

"Holy God," he had said. "I'm hit bad. I feel all—they got me. I'm going, Tony. So long, fella. Tell Agnes and the kid—"

Then he had pitched forward, and a young Flanagan had been out of the car and after the three men. One he had dropped right

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away, with the first shot he fired; the second he had got around the street corner; and the third he had trapped in a dark alleyway.

But the alleyway had not frightened young Flanagan, nor had the bullets that had whistled out of it past his head. There was a company to which young Flanagan belonged, and so there was a thing that had to be done by him. He had not thought about it at all. He had just raced ahead, into the dark alleyway, and had done it. But of course all that was a long time ago. Oh, yes, old Flanagan remembered. Twenty years or more.

"We were talking about you the other night at the precinct," Harry Mahoney told him. "They give us a new guy that ain't too bad, but lemme tell you he ain't no Tony Flanagan, Captain. How you feeling these days? You coming back on the job soon?"

"I don't know," Flanagan replied slowly. "It's pretty hard to say, Harry. But I've been thinking, since I've got my time in—" Outside the window Bailey's terrified white face wisped away under a curl of three-in-the-morning fog, so that Flanagan could no longer see it even when he brushed mist from the glass. But it had been there, surely. Flanagan had seen it as plain as—

"Can't blame you a bit," Boudreau said. "Get the hell out of the department while you still got a lot of good years to expect, that's the way I see it. You got it made, Captain. You got everything in the world now, so why not enjoy it, huh?"

"Right on," Mahoney agreed. "But I got to take a break down at that diner, Phil. Give me a couple of minutes, huh? I'll be right back."

They swung in to the curb and Mahoney trotted off. Boudreau got out too, yawning and stretching. Then, glancing along the other side of the street, he suddenly froze.

"Look at that car," he told Flanagan. "Over there by the loading dock, Captain. Black Dodge, isn't it?"

And it was, Flanagan could see, twisting his head around in the car to look at it.

"But I bet," Boudreau said, hurriedly checking his revolver holster, "it isn't the same license plate. Of course. They change that on every job they pull. Smart cookies, these fellas. They've been hitting the warehouses around here for the past six months. Guess I better make a quick check over there, Captain. Tell Harry, will you? He said he'd be right back."

Boudreau moved quickly and quietly off, into the deep shadows

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around the loading dock and the parked Dodge. Flanagan stayed where he was. He had better, something whispered to him. It would be time enough to help after Boudreau had made the identification. Now he would only be in the way. His wristwatch showed him that it was 4:25, and the street ahead shone emptily, with a black glisten of pavement, under the arc lights. Even on the elevated highway down at the end of it, only an occasional car whizzed by.

Flanagan, sitting edgily forward on the back seat, felt a sudden cold prickle along the spine. Was he afraid? Captain Flanagan? There was a company to which he belonged, as he had belonged to it more than 20 years ago outside that liquor store, so not to worry now. Still, he had to admit that he felt damned queer—a brief dryness in the throat, a slight quiver of the arm muscles, a sudden unsteadiness in the way his heart had begun to beat. What the hell bothered him? It could not be fear. It had never been that before. Then what?

He got out of the prowl car. Up on the highway a night-hawk taxi raced by, but around him all other sounds seemed to be cushioned in thick velvet. He rubbed his mouth, roughly passing the back of his hand over it three or four times, and moved ahead hurriedly to shelter himself in a garage doorway. But he was only obeying a proper caution here, that was all. Flanagan had attended to matters like this before and by God he could attend to them again!

It was annoying, however, not to be sure of what was going on. He could see no one, not even Boudreau, and not even a small telltale sound could be heard anywhere. What had happened to Harry Mahoney? Why wasn't he back yet? But trust a rotten time-serving little cringer of that type. He knew well when and where to make himself scarce. Let Flanagan and Boudreau attend to this matter. Mahoney would do the sensible thing. He would post himself down in the corner diner, safe and secure there, until he knew it was all over.

The thought of it brought up in Flanagan a wild surge of fury. Damn it, why had he met them tonight? Why had he been stupid enough to get into the car with them? Trapped now—and it might be, very soon, a bullet in the head for his pains. No matter then that Tony Flanagan had got everything in God's world for himself. Dead and destroyed here in the gutter if he so much as poked his nose out of the garage doorway. Keep it in, then. Look out for

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himself. Who the hell else? Where was Boudreau? What was he doing?

It was impossible to say. He must be moving along in the shadows, silently, with great care, and peering vainly for him. Flanagan became aware of a rapid and persistent tic under the lower lid of his right eye. He had his police revolver out, and it seemed to him that his hand clung to it with desperate tightness, as if his fingers had become frozen in that position, as if from the shoulder down his whole arm had become paralyzed. Sudden cold sweat broke out on his forehead and on his chest. Why?

The thing was incomprehensible. When had Tony Flanagan been afraid of anyone or anything in the world? It had to be only a stupid idea that had come into his head—that he stood all alone now, with no one to care what happened to him, because there was a company of which he was no longer a member. He felt the sweat drop into his eyes at that and shook his head savagely. Was that why, more than 20 years ago, he had been able to plunge into that dark alley after a man with a gun without even thinking about it—and why tonight he could not move even a step out of this doorway? Once there had been the fellowship of the department for him—but tonight there was not. Could that be the answer?

No, never! He had lost nothing. What he had to do here was simple enough—follow Boudreau and no matter what happened, stand shoulder to shoulder with him. But there was an open area in the street before he could reach that loading dock where the Dodge was parked, and Flanagan discovered that he could not force himself out into it. He simply could not. Twice he tried. Twice, as if by the grasp of a physical hand from behind, he was pulled back.

He lifted his head, eyes squeezed shut tightly, an agonized expression twitching the corners of his lips. But he did not try to move out into the open a third time. He felt a shudder deep inside him, and then, little by little, felt it ripple down through his whole body. He did nothing. He just waited.

"What is it?"—and Harry Mahoney's anxious voice was just beside him. "Where's Phil, Captain? What's going on?"

Flanagan, averting his face, managed to gesture with the gun—up ahead—and as he did so a door rasped open at the loading dock. No light was turned on, but four men could be seen gathered now in the loading doorway. One of them jumped down

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quickly and opened the car trunk. The three on the platform, deftly and rapidly, in perfect silence, passed down carton after carton. Then one by one the three men jumped down also, not bothering to close the loading door after them. But Boudreau used his head. He was one against four, so far as he knew, and it must have seemed to him that about the only chance he had was to let them get into the car before he revealed himself.

"Hold it right there!" Flanagan heard. "I got you covered. Don't start that car!"

But they did. Apparently they started it with the gas pedal down to the floor, rocketing it straight ahead, and when Boudreau ran out into the street, gun drawn, they fired at him. Yellow flares as tiny as fireflies spat at him, and Boudreau was hit. He spun around in the headlights, staggered to one side, and crashed head-on into an areaway railing.

Flanagan saw all that, felt the cold sweat once more, and stayed right where he was. Harry Mahoney did not. At the first shot he was out in the street, on one knee, firing back, and Flanagan found himself making an altogether foolish attempt to force his body back. The car rushed on drunkenly at him, windshield shattered, and for the fraction of a moment he could see the two men in the front seat and the two in the back. So they would all have been sitting ducks, in that breath of time under the street light, for Tony Flanagan who twice in earlier years had made the police rifle team.

But he did not fire at them. All he did was to fall to his knees and cross his two arms over his face. It was Harry Mahoney who never gave an inch, who fired a second time, a third time, a fourth time as the black Dodge roared by, straight across the street, and smashed into a parked truck. There was a squeal of tires, a whining of brakes, then the crash and then stinging quiet. The Dodge lay on its side. One of the doors had popped open. An arm reached out of it, groped around vaguely, and flopped back.

Harry Mahoney, letting out a long shaky breath, swung around to Flanagan.

"You all right?" he demanded. "You didn't get hit, did you?"

"No, fine," Flanagan croaked. Still on his knees, he lowered his arms dazedly and realized that he had dropped his police revolver. Mahoney retrieved it out of the gutter and ran down to check on Boudreau.

"Not too bad," he yelled back. "Just in the shoulder, Captain.

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But we had a pretty good ruckus there for a while, didn't we?"

Flanagan did not answer him. He was peering ahead down the long narrowing street, empty and rain-washed under the street lights, and it seemed to him that he could see a figure dwindling away down there, getting smaller and smaller, farther and farther away; a figure all by itself. It did not turn its head to him, but he knew who it was. It was Anthony Vincent Flanagan.

He pushed himself up dumbly. But that couldn't be true. He needed another chance. He wanted one! It had not been a deliberate thing. He had just failed to understand in time that the bargain with Broderick had been all or nothing. So listen up there. Please, please! There was more to his life still than walking into a dead end. There was a company that still existed and Flanagan was still a member. Even if just now he—

"Better sit down in the car," Mahoney suggested. "You look kind of shaken up, Captain. Let me give you a hand."

But Flanagan backed off at that, shaking his head quickly and thrusting out both arms. There was no room in the prowl car for Tony Flanagan, it came to him; in that company his place was now forever forfeited. A certain problem had arisen. So he turned blindly, before the others would get there, and with one arm still extended, as if groping, he lurched around the street corner.

After that he was all alone. He moved hurriedly in whatever direction the pavement took him. He knew what he had become at last. He was the ex-police captain who had got everything in the world for himself—and who, in return, had been clever enough to trade off for that nothing more vitally needful to a man than his honor.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD E. WESTLAKE

The unusual—even extraordinary—tale of a mugging, of a beautiful girl in danger, of a shirt salesman in a clothing store who becomes a shining knight . . . Why unusual, even extraordinary? Well, read the story and judge for yourself. We promise you won't forget it, perhaps never . . .

THE GIRL OF MY DREAMS

by DONALD E. WESTLAKE

Yesterday I bought a gun.

I'm very confused; I don't know what to do.

I have always been a mild and shy young man, quiet and conservative and polite. I have been employed the last five years—since at 19 I left college because of lack of funds—at the shirt counter of Willis & DeKalb, Men's Clothiers, Stores in Principal Cities, and I would say that I have been generally content with my lot. Although recently I have been finding the new manager, Mr. Miller, somewhat abrasive—not to overstate the matter—the work itself has always been agreeable, and I have continued to look forward to a quiet lifetime in the same employment.

I have never been much of a dreamer, neither by day nor by night. Reveries, daydreams, these are the products of vaulting ambition or vaulting desire, of both of which I have remained for the most part gratefully free. And though science assures us that some part of every night's sleep is spent in the manufacture of dreams, mine must normally be gentle and innocuous, even dull, as I rarely remember them in the morning.

I would date the beginning of the change in my life from the moment of the retirement of old Mr. Randmunson from his post as manager of our local Willis & DeKalb store, and his prompt replacement by Mr. Miller, a stranger from the Akron branch.

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Mr. Miller is a hearty man, cheeks and nose all red with ruddy health, handshake painfully firm, voice roaring, laugh aggressive. Not yet 35, he moves and speaks with the authority and self-confidence of a man much older, and he makes it no secret that some day he intends to be president of the entire chain. Our little store is merely a stopover for him, another rung upward on the ladder of his success.

His first day in the store, he came to me, ebullient and overpowering and supremely positive. He asked my opinion, he discussed business and geography and entertainment, he offered me a cigarette, he thumped my shoulder. "We'll get along, Ronald!" he told me. "Just keep moving those shirts!"

"Yes, Mr. Miller."

"And let me have an inventory list, by style and size, tomorrow morning."

"Sir?"

"Any time before noon," he said carelessly, and laughed, and thumped my shoulder. "We'll have a great team here, Ronald, a first-rate team!"

Two nights later I dreamed for the first time of Delia.

I went to bed as usual at 11:40, after the news on channel six. I switched out the light, went to sleep, and in utter simplicity and clarity the dream began. In it I was driving my automobile on Western Avenue, out from the center of town. It was all thoroughly realistic—the day, the traffic, the used-car lots along Western Avenue all gleaming in the spring sun. My six-year-old Plymouth was pulling just a little to the right, exactly as it does in real life. I knew I was dreaming, but at the same time it was very pleasant to be in my car on Western Avenue on such a lovely spring day.

A scream startled me, and my foot trod reflexively on the brake pedal. Nearby, on the sidewalk, a man and girl were struggling together. He was trying to wrest a package from her but she was resisting, clutching the package tight with both arms around it, and again screaming. The package was wrapped in brown paper and was about the size and shape of a suit carton from Willis & DeKalb.

I want to emphasize that everything was very realistic, down to the smallest detail. There were none of the abrupt shifts in time or space or viewpoint normally associated with dreams, no impossibilities or absurdities.

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There was no one else on the sidewalk nearby, and I acted almost without thinking. Braking my Plymouth at the curb, I leaped out, ran around the car, and began to grapple with the girl's attacker. He was wearing brown corduroy trousers and a black leather jacket and he needed a shave. His breath was bad.

"Leave her alone!" I shouted, while the girl continued to scream.

The mugger had to give up his grip on the package in order to deal with me. He pushed me away and I staggered ineffectively backward just as I would do in real life, while the girl kicked him repeatedly in the shins. As soon as I regained my balance I rushed forward again, and now he decided he'd had enough. He turned tail and ran, down Western Avenue and through a used-car lot and so out of sight.

The girl, breathing hard, still clutching the package to her breast, turned to smile gratefully on me and say, "How can I ever thank you?"

What a beautiful girl! The most beautiful girl I have ever seen, before or since. Auburn hair and lovely features, deep clear hazel eyes, slender wrists with every delicate birdlike bone outlined beneath the tender skin. She wore a blue and white spring dress and casual white shoes. Silver teardrops graced her graceful ears.

She gazed at me with her melting, warm, companionable eyes, and she smiled at me with lips that murmured to be kissed, and she said to me, "How can I ever thank you?" in a voice as dulcet as honey.

And there the dream ended, in extreme closeup on my Delia's face.

I awoke the next morning in a state of euphoria. The dream was still vivid in my mind in every detail, and most particularly I remembered the look of her sweet face at the end. That face stayed with me throughout the day, a day which otherwise might have been only bitter, as it was on that day Mr. Miller gave the two-week notice to my friend and co-worker Gregory Shostrill of the stockroom. I shared, of course, the employees' general indignation that such an old and loyal worker had been so summarily dismissed, but for me the outrage was tempered by the continuing memory of last night's wonderful dream.

I never anticipated for a second that I would ever see my dream girl again, but that night she returned to me, and my astonishment was only matched by my delight. I went to bed at my

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usual hour, fell asleep, and the dream began. It started precisely where, the night before, it had ended, with the beautiful girl saying to me, "How can I ever thank you?"

I now functioned at two levels of awareness. The first, in which I knew myself to be dreaming, was flabbergasted to find the dream picking up as though no day had elapsed, no break at all had taken place in the unfolding of this story. The second level, in which I was an active participant in the dream rather than its observer, treated this resumption of events as natural and inevitable and obvious, and reacted without delay.

It was this second level which replied, "Anyone would have done what I did," and then added, "May I drive you wherever you're going?"

Now here, I grant, the dream had begun to be somewhat less than realistic. That I should talk with this lovely creature so effortlessly, without stammering, without blushing, with no worms of terror crawling within my skull, was not entirely as the same scene would have been played in real life. In this situation, in reality, I might have attacked the mugger as I'd done in the dream, but on being left alone with the girl afterward I would surely have been reduced to a strained smile and a strangled silence.

But not in the dream. In the dream I was gallant and effortless, as I offered to drive her wherever she was going.

"If it wouldn't be putting you out of your way—"

"Not in the least," I assured her. "Where are you going?"

"Home," she said. "Summit Street. Do you know it?"

"Of course. It's right on my way."

Which wasn't at all true. Summit Street, tucked away in the Oak Hills section, a rather well-to-do residential neighborhood, was a side street off a side street. There's never any reason to drive on Summit Street unless Summit Street is your destination.

Nevertheless I said it was on my way—and she accepted pleasantly. Holding the car door for her, I noticed my Plymouth was unusually clean and I was glad I'd finally got around to having it washed. New seat covers, too, very nice-looking; I couldn't remember having bought them but I was pleased I had.

Once we were driving together along Western Avenue I introduced myself. "My name's Ronald. Ronald Grady."

"Delia," she told me, smiling again. "Delia Wright."

"Hello, Delia Wright."

Her smile broadened. "Hello, Ronald Grady." She reached out

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and, for just a second, touched her fingers to my right wrist.

After that the dream continued in the most naturalistic manner, the two of us chatting about one thing and another—the high schools we'd attended and how odd it was we'd never met before. When we reached Summit Street, she pointed out her house and I stopped at the curb. She said, "Won't you come in for a cup of coffee? I'd like you to meet my mother."

"I really can't now," I told her, smiling regretfully. "But if you're doing nothing tonight, could I take you to dinner and a movie?"

"I'd like that," she said.

"So would I."

Our eyes met, and the moment seemed to deepen—and there the dream stopped.

I awoke next morning with a pleasant warm sensation on my right wrist, and I knew it was because Delia had touched me there. I ate a heartier breakfast than usual, startled my mother—I have continued to live at home with my mother and an older sister, seeing no point in the additional expense of a place of my own—startled my mother, I say, by singing rather loudly as I dressed, and went off to work in as sunny a mood as could be imagined.

Which Mr. Miller, a few hours later, succeeded in shattering.

I admit I returned late from lunch. The people at the auto store had assured me they could install the new seat covers in 15 minutes, but it actually took them over half an hour. Still, it was the first time in five years I had ever been late, and Mr. Miller's sarcasm and abuse seemed to me under the circumstances excessive. He carried on for nearly half an hour, and in fact continued to make reference to the incident for the next two weeks.

Still, my hurt and outrage at Mr. Miller's attitude were not so great as they might have been, had I not had that spot of warmth on my wrist to remind me of Delia. I thought of Delia, of her beauty and grace, of my own ease and confidence with her, and I weathered the Miller storm much better than might have been expected.

That night I hardly watched the eleven o'clock news at all. I stayed till it ended only because any change in my habits would have produced a string of irrelevant questions from my mother; but as soon as the newscaster had bid me good night I headed directly for my own bed and sleep.

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And Delia. I had been afraid to hope the dream would continue into a third night, but it did, it did, and most delightfully so.

This time the dream skipped. It jumped over those dull meaningless hours when I was not with Delia, those hours as stale and empty as the real world, and it began tonight with me back at Summit Street promptly at seven, and Delia opening her front door to greet me.

Again the dream was utterly realistic. The white dinner jacket I wore was unlike anything in my waking wardrobe, but otherwise all was lifelike.

In tonight's dream we went to dinner together at Astoldi's, an expensive Italian restaurant which I had attended—in daylife—only once, at the testimonial dinner for Mr. Randmunson when he retired from Willis & DeKalb. But tonight I behaved—and felt, which is equally important—as though I dined at Astoldi's twice a week.

The dream ended as we were leaving the restaurant after dinner, on our way to the theater.

The next day, and the days that followed, passed in a slow and velvet haze. I no longer cared about Mr. Miller's endless abrasiveness. I bought a white dinner jacket, though in daylife I had no use for it. Later on, after a dream segment in which I wore a dark blue ascot, I bought three such ascots and hung them in my closet.

The dream, meanwhile, went on and on without a break, never skipping a night. It omitted all periods of time when I was not with my Delia, but those times spent with her were presented entirely, and chronologically, and with great realism.

There were, of course, small exceptions to the realism. My ease with Delia, for instance. And the fact that my Plymouth grew steadily younger night by night, and soon stopped pulling to the right.

That first date with Delia was followed by a second and a third. We went dancing together, we went swimming together, we went for rides on a lake in her cousin's cabin cruiser and for drives in the mountains in her own Porsche convertible. I kissed her, and her lips were indescribably sweet.

I saw her in all lights and under all conditions. Diving from a tacketa-tacketa long board into a jade-green swimming pool, and framed for one heartbeat in silhouette against the pale blue sky. Dancing in a white ball gown, low across her tanned breasts and

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trailing the floor behind her. Kneeling in the garden behind her house, dressed in shorts and a sleeveless pale green blouse, wearing gardening gloves and holding a trowel, laughing, with dirt smudged on her nose and cheek. Driving her white Porsche, her auburn hair blowing in the wind, her eyes bright with joy and laughter.

The dream, the Dream, became to me much finer than reality, oh, much much finer. And in the Dream there was no haste, no hurry, no fear. Delia and I were in love, we were lovers, though we had not yet actually lived together. I was calm and confident, slow and sure, feeling no frantic need to possess my Delia now, *now*. I knew the time would come, and in our tender moments I could see in her eyes that she also knew, and that she was not afraid.

Slowly we learned one another. We kissed, I held her tight, my arm encircled her slender waist. I touched her breasts and, one moonlit night on a deserted beach, I stroked her lovely legs.

How I loved my Delia! And how I needed her, how necessary an antidote she was to the increasing bitterness of my days.

It was Mr. Miller, of course, who disrupted my days as thoroughly as Delia soothed and sweetened my nights. Our store was soon unrecognizable, most of the older employees gone, new people and new methods everywhere. I believe I was kept on only because I was such a silent enduring victim for Mr. Miller's sarcasm, his nasal voice and his twisted smile and his bitter eyes. He was in such a starved hurry for the presidency of the firm, he was so frantic to capture Willis & DeKalb, that it forced him to excesses beyond belief.

But I was, if not totally immune, at least relatively safe from the psychological blows of Mr. Miller's manner. The joyful calm of the Dream carried me through all but the very worst of the days in the store.

Another development was that I found myself more self-assured with other people in daylife. Woman customers, and even the fashionably attractive and newly hired woman employees, were beginning to make it clear that they found me not entirely without interest. It goes without saying that I remained faithful to my Delia, but it was nevertheless pleasurable to realize that a real-world social life was available to me, should I ever want it.

Not that I could visualize myself ever being less than fully satisfied with Delia.

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But then it all began to change. Slowly, very very slowly, so that I don't know for how long the tide had already ebbed before I first became aware. In my Delia's eyes—I first saw it in her eyes. Where before they had been warm bottomless pools, now they seemed flat and cold and opaque; I no longer saw in them the candor and beauty of before. Also, from time to time I would catch a pensive frown on her face, a solemn thoughtfulness.

"What is it?" I would ask her. "Tell me. Whatever I can do—"

"It's nothing," she would insist. "Really, darling, it's nothing at all." And kiss me on the cheek.

In this same period, while matters were unexpectedly worsening in the dream, a slow improvement had begun in the store. All the employees to be fired were now gone, all the new employees in and used to their jobs, all the new routines worked with and grown accustomed to. Mr. Miller seemed also to be growing accustomed to his new job and the new store. Less and less was he taking out his viciousness and insecurity on me. He had, in fact, taken to avoiding me for days at a time, as though beginning to feel ashamed of his earlier harshness.

Which was fine but irrelevant. What was my waking time after all but the necessary adjunct to my dream? It was the dream that mattered, and the dream was not going well, not going well at all.

It was, in fact, getting worse. Delia began to break dates with me, and to make excuses when I asked her for dates. The pensive looks, the distracted looks, the buried sense of impatience, all were more frequent now. Entire portions of the dream were spent with me alone—I was *never* alone in the early nights!—pacing the floor of my room, waiting for a promised call that never came.

What could it be? I asked her and asked, but always she evaded my questions, my eyes, my arms. If I pressed, she would insist it was nothing, nothing, and then for a little while she would be her old self again, gay and beautiful, and I could believe it had only been my imagination after all. But only for a little while, and then the distraction, the evasiveness, the impatience, the excuses, all would return once more.

Until two nights ago. We sat in her convertible beneath a full moon, high on a dark cliff overlooking the sea, and I forced the issue at last. "Delia," I said. "Tell me the truth, I have to know. Is there another man?"

She looked at me, and I saw she was about to deny everything yet again, but this time she couldn't do it. She bowed her head.

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"I'm sorry, Ronald," she said, her voice so low I could barely hear the words. "There is."

"Who?"

She raised her head, gazing at me with eyes in which guilt and pity and love and shame were all commingled, and she said, "It's Mr. Miller."

I recoiled. "*What?*"

"I met him at the country club," she said. "I can't help it, Ronald. I wish to God I'd never met the man. He has some sort of hold over me, some hypnotic power. That first night he took me to a motel and—"

Then she told me, told me everything, every action and every demand, in the most revolting detail. And though I squirmed and struggled, though I strained and yearned, I could not wake up, I could not end the dream. Delia told me everything she had done with Mr. Miller, her helplessness to deny him even though it was *me* she loved and he for whom she felt only detestation, her constant trysts with him night after night, direct from my arms to his. She told me of their planned meeting later that very night in the motel where it had all begun, and she told me of her bitter self-knowledge that even now, after I knew everything, *she would still meet him.*

Then at last her toneless voice was finished and we were in silence once again, beneath the moon, high on the cliff. *Then* I awoke.

That was two nights ago. Yesterday I arose the same as ever—what else could I do?—and I went to the store as usual and I behaved normally in every way. What else could I do? But I noticed again Mr. Miller's muted attitude toward me, and now I understood it was the result of his guilty knowledge. Of course Delia had told him about me—she'd described all that to me during her confession, relating how Mr. Miller had laughed and been scornful to hear that "Ronald the sap" had never been to bed with her. "Doesn't know what he's missing, does he?" she quoted him as saying, with a laugh.

At lunchtime I drove past the motel she'd named, and a squalid place it was, peeling stucco painted a garish blue. Not far beyond it was a gunsmith's; on the spur of the moment I stopped, talked to the salesman about "plinking" and "varmints," and bought a snub-nosed Iver Johnson Trailsman revolver. The salesman inserted the .32 bullets into the chambers, and I put the box con-

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taining the gun into the glove compartment of my car. Last evening I carried the gun unobserved into the house and hid it in my room, in a dresser drawer, beneath my sweaters.

And last night, as usual, I dreamed. But in the dream I was not with Delia. In the dream I was alone, in my bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed with the gun in my hand, listening to the small noises of my mother and sister as they prepared for sleep, waiting for the house to be quiet.

In last night's dream I had the gun and I planned to use it. In last night's dream I had not left my Plymouth in the driveway as usual but half a block away, parked at the curb. In last night's dream I was waiting only for my mother and sister to be safely asleep, when I intended to creep silently from the house, hurry down the sidewalk to my Plymouth, drive to that motel, and enter Room 7—it's always Room 7, Delia told me, always the same room—where it was my intention to shoot Mr. Miller dead.

In last night's dream I heard my mother and sister moving about, at first in the kitchen and then in the bathroom and then in their bedrooms. In last night's dream the house slowly, gradually, finally became quiet, and I got to my feet, putting the gun in my pocket, preparing to leave the room. And at that point the dream stopped.

I have been very confused today. I have wanted to talk to Mr. Miller, but I've been afraid to. I have been unsure what to do next, or in which life to do it. If I kill Mr. Miller in the dream tonight, will he still be in the store tomorrow, with his guilt and his scorn? If I kill Mr. Miller in the dream tonight, and if he is still in the store tomorrow, will I go mad? If I fail to kill Mr. Miller, somewhere, somehow, how can I go on living with myself?

When I came home from work this evening, I didn't park the Plymouth in the driveway as usual, but left it at the curb, half a block from here. My mind was in turmoil all evening, but I behaved normally, and after the eleven o'clock news I came up here to my bedroom.

But I was afraid to sleep, afraid to dream. I took the gun from the drawer, and I have been sitting here, listening to the small sounds of my mother and my sister as they prepare for bed.

Can things ever again be as they were between Delia and me? Can the memory of what has happened ever be erased? I turn the gun and look into its black barrel and I ask myself all these questions. "Perchance to dream." If I arranged it that I would

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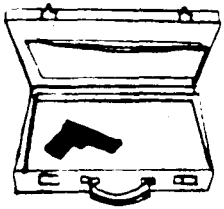
never awake again, would I go on dreaming? But would the dream become worse instead of better?

Is it possible—as some faint doubting corner of my mind suggests—even remotely possible, that Delia is not what she seems, that she was never true, that she is a succubus who has come to destroy me through my dream?

The house is silent. The hour is late. If I stay awake, if I creep from the house and drive to the motel, what will I find in Room 7?

And whom shall I kill?



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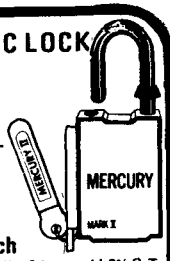

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C. DALY KING

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Mr. King's book contains eight "episodes" about Trevis Tarrant, gentleman of leisure, dilettante and esthete, who is usually consulted in strange and bizarre cases which, as your Editor once wrote, "are in many ways the most imaginative detective short stories of our time." The time, of course, was the second and last decade of The Golden Age.

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THE EPISODE OF THE ABSENT FISH

by C. DALY KING

My foot bumped something on the floor of the elevator and I reached down and picked up the fishing rod. Ordinarily it would have surprised me to find a rod there, but I was too flustered now to notice it. The automatic lift jarred to its landing and I threw the doors open.

The telephone was across the living room. To the right? Yes, to the right, over by the western window. I started over to it to call the police. Just then the thing rang.

I'd cut this off, whoever it was. The police must be notified, first of all. I picked up the receiver.

Tarrant's voice said, "Hello. Is Mr. Phelan there?"

It's funny how that steadied me. Of course, Tarrant can do that; anyone can do it who remains unruffled and calm in the face of danger or even of disaster, who views violence coldly, seeking the logic of the event and thus the best way to meet it. And solving, most of the time, the unsolvable. Anyhow, he didn't know what had happened. But he was Tarrant and his voice brought me back, somewhat, to myself.

I said, "Yes, I'm here. But I thought you—"

"Never mind. I've gotten back. It was a washout. Are you all right?"

"*I'm* all right." I made a noise, an hysterical little giggle, and Tarrant's tone altered abruptly.

"See here, Jerry, what's wrong? Genthal?"

"He's dead . . . I was just going to call the police."

"Hold it," commanded Tarrant. "Skip the details. I'll be with you in six minutes. Don't call the police until I get there."

He hung up and left me standing with the phone in my hand.

Genthal's man must have let Tarrant in on the floor below, for there he was before the six minutes were up.

I had been pacing the living-room floor. What bothered me wasn't so much Genthal's murder; I've seldom met anyone who seemed to me more superfluous. A week in his company, I felt,

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might have brought *me* to homicide; half a day had been enough to make me uncivil.

Genthal was rich, but it wasn't that. It was his cheap hypocrisy about his wealth. If he didn't like it, he could have given it away; instead, he ran a newspaper at a handsome loss, about as low a piece of journalism as the city boasted. Actually it was made up chiefly of scurrilous personal attacks on various public figures, although ostensibly its purpose was to propagandize for whatever "underprivileged" laborers happened currently to be on strike, usually for higher wages.

Whether or not they were underpaid, Genthal certainly wasn't. You should have seen his place. He had the top floor of a big skyscraper—five bedrooms and two storerooms, five baths, reception room, dining room, kitchen, pantry, two servant's rooms and bath, large entrance hall. The word for the furnishings, I think, is sumptuous. The penthouse was above all this.

The penthouse was the living room, 30 by 40 feet, with a little terrace running around it. The real terrace was still higher, on the roof of the penthouse. From below you came up to the living room by a broad staircase and in the east wall of the living room was a door, concealed by hangings, that led to an interior stair to the roof. But a one-story climb was enough for Genthal, so he had an automatic elevator opening into the northwest corner of the chamber, running just between living room and roof.

It was a push-button type of lift with a collapsible, brass, grilled door inside it and the usual sliding doors on the terrace and below. On the top of the elevator shaft, where it protruded near the edge of the roof terrace, was a cramped little box for the electric motor that ran the thing.

The terrace, of course, was also sumptuous. From around the elevator shaft stretched awnings on all sides but one, covering two-thirds of the terrace, leaving the rest of it open for sunbathing. Grass rugs and mats over the tiles, wicker garden furniture, a little bar against the elevator, flower boxes against the railing at the edge, and numerous boxed hedges scattered about. The pallet on which he stretched out his fat torso in the sun was on the south side, just at the edge of the awning.

Tarrant's face was serious when he came in. He put his hat on the table in the center of the room and jammed out his cigarette in the ashtray.

"Okay, Jerry. What about the termites?"

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Not exactly the entrance speech I had expected. I said, "Huh?"

"His termites. Has he done anything about them?"

Well, he had, sure enough. In one of his storerooms Genthal had kept a large colony of termites in an enormous air-conditioned glass cage where they bored from within on columns of wood to their heart's content and had constructed an earthy termitarium some seven feet high. About as curious a hobby as I had ever encountered.

"He bumped them off, every one of them, after lunch," I told Tarrant. "I went with him. First he sprayed the cage full of Flit or some kind of poison through the air-conditioning vents. The beasts came running out of the nest and dashing about at a great rate, but they didn't last long. Then he opened the door and doused the wood columns and the nest itself with a couple of cansful of the fluid. When he closed it up again, there wasn't a live termite left, I'll wager. But—but what's that got to do with it?"

"A good deal," Tarrant replied grimly. He sat down and lit another cigarette. He hadn't even asked where Genthal was.

"He's on the roof," I told him. "He—"

Tarrant counseled, "Take it easy, Jerry. Here, have a cigarette." He tossed one over to me. "So far as the police are concerned, his body hasn't been discovered yet. Now," he continued, "I left you to stay with Genthal today and this evening, until I could get back. I told you he was threatened and you had your gun in case you needed it. I want to know how you let him be killed. But in sequence, and slowly. Take your time and tell me everything that has happened since you came here this morning. I mean everything."

"I got here about nine thirty. His man brought me up to this room and Genthal told me to sit down and play my games. A surly hypocritical son of a—"

"Never mind that. I know Genthal." Tarrant emphasized, "Just what happened. Precisely."

"All right. I found a book. He was reading; I did, too. He got a telephone call around eleven o'clock from his nasty newssheet. Something about an editorial, so far as I could make out from half of the talk. The editor didn't like it. Genthal didn't like the editor. I don't know what the other fellow said but Genthal used some pretty filthy language. Then he hung up and went back to his reading."

"Uh-huh," Tarrant grunted, as if this fitted into the picture.

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"About twelve thirty the servant brought along rum cocktails. I had a couple. Then we went down to lunch. You don't want to hear about that; it was just a good lunch, well served."

"I want to hear about it."

"Madrilene. Cold cuts. Potato salad. Hot artichokes. Sauternes. Cherries in brandy. Cigarettes. That's all."

"No one had called or come in all this time? Only the one telephone call?"

"No one came here at all except a couple of repairmen and you'll see they couldn't have—"

My friend looked almost disgusted. "Jerry, for heaven's sake. *Everything*!"

"All right. Two men came to repair the elevator. The first one got here just after the telephone call and said he was to grease the cables or something. I think his name was Mike and he had a big bag of tools. That's all I know about him. He got in the elevator and went up. The second one came in just before lunch. His name was Sam Ciccano, because I saw it on the company card he showed when he came in. He went up to adjust the motor and we went down to lunch."

"This is the lot? No one else? . . . Okay, go on."

"After lunch we came back here. By and by we had gin rickeys."

"Quite a bit of drinking. Were you getting tiddly, Jerry?"

"I was not," I said indignantly. "Maybe the rickey did something to him, though, for he jumped up and said he was going to do in the termites. I wasn't supposed to leave him, so I went along. I've told you about that. Well, when he'd finished, he looked sleepy and said he was going up top and take a sunbath and that he didn't want me tagging along. I told him I'd have to go. He said the hell I would. In the end we compromised. I certainly did everything I could. There wasn't a chance anyone could get at him when I'd finished."

"Uh-huh. Someone did, I gather. What *did* you do?"

"I made him go up the stairs with me and I locked the stair door from the terrace side. The key is still in the lock on that side, I've tried the door. When we got to the terrace I went all over it and made sure no one was there, behind a hedge or anywhere. Then I climbed Ciccano's ladder up to the motor space on top of the shaft and found him there, just finishing up with the motor. He came down with me, folded up his ladder, and we both

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took the elevator to this room. Genthal was at the bar, making himself another drink when we left the terrace above. I saw Ciccano go down the main stairs with his ladder in his hand and no one has come in since until you arrived."

"What about this Mike? The greaser. Where is he?"

"He must have gone out while we were having lunch. Ciccano said he hadn't seen him for some time and he certainly wasn't on the roof when I searched it. All he had to do when he had finished his greasing was to walk down the stairs, through the main-hall door, then take the building elevator down. That's a private automatic one, too, up to this apartment."

"And then?"

"I waited more than two hours, sitting right here in front of the roof elevator. I waited because he didn't want me on the terrace with him. Finally I went up in the elevator. He's lying next to his pallet with the top and back of his head bashed in by a heavy mallet from the bar. One of those things you crush ice with. He couldn't have done it himself and there was no one else there to have done it."

Tarrant put on a pair of cotton gloves and tried the locked door of the terrace staircase. Then he went over to the elevator. "Come on," he said, "let's have a look at it. I'll have to hurry and get out. I have a key to the main door below and no one knows I'm here; I don't want to be here when the police arrive. As soon as I'm through, you telephone them and tell them just what you have told me. All of it, mind you—except that I have been here."

On the roof he bent over Genthal's body. "Bashed in, all right," he murmured, and picked up the bar mallet which had been stained but not a great deal. Then we searched the roof again and he even had me lift him up onto the awning supports, along which he crawled until he could look through the slats of the motor-housing above the elevator. When we came down, he admitted,

"There is no one there now, that's sure."

Back in the living room he grinned, for the first time. "Carry on, Jerry. Come back to my apartment as soon as they let you go . . . if they do. Don't worry, I'll get you out if they hold you. Just the same, it is your fault, you know."

With that amiable remark he gathered up the butts of the three cigarettes we had used and went softly down the main stairs.

I called up the police. . .

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They did try to hold me. I had to tell the whole story three times and I was just starting on the fourth, in a growing atmosphere of unpleasantness, when Peake came in. Peake's the inspector whom Tarrant knows; well, I know him too, for I've been mixed up in some of Tarrant's cases, or episodes, which have involved us with the police, but always—and it seemed a fortunate circumstance to me just then—on their side of the fence.

Peake said, "Sergeant, stop wasting your time. Have that statement typed out and let him sign it. This is a Bolo bump-off; the F.B.I. say he was going to testify before a Congressional Committee tomorrow. They thought he was a hostile witness, but it looks as if they were wrong. That's our lead, anyhow. Phelan's an interlude in a case like this; let's get into the main act."

That was pretty airy, and I didn't know how much I liked it; but I was glad enough to get out of there and take a taxi over to Tarrant's East Side apartment. 'Hido, his butler-valet, let me in and returned to sit down beside me in the sunken living room, so there was evidently a social truce in progress and he was now temporarily Dr. Cabay, the Filipino medical man and Tarrant's friend-in-consultation. This happened whenever Tarrant wanted to sharpen his wits on a problem, for 'Hido was a servant by choice rather than station and a very smart lad to boot.

Tarrant asked, "Pleasant time, Jerry?"

"Not very," I admitted. "In fact, I'm surprised they let me go. I don't see how anyone else *could* have bopped him."

"Neither do the police," the other assured me. "You're in my custody, more or less. But Peake has the communist angle on it now and I've just been talking with him, building him up a bit on that."

"No use sending him after a red herring," I said. "They weren't against Genthal; he was one of the worst of the lot. Peake will have checked that off by dinnertime."

"Not at all. Think of the termites."

"What in God's name have the termites to do with it?"

'Hido contributed, "Classical education leave big holes . . . Mister Jerry don't know termites fine example of bolshevists in animal kingdom. Have better organized for communism than anyone else can do. For rich communist to have hobby of termites very natzural business. Contemplate perfect sozial state. These bugs most highly efficient for communism, even eat up each other when comrade-termites die."

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"Most unpleasant feeding habits," Tarrant nodded. "Still, if you like communal efficiency—"

"But he killed them off. I told you." This just didn't make sense to me.

"Just so, Jerry. Genthal was first a fellow traveler, then he became the real thing. And then he got tired of it. Some of them do, you know. And when they fall out, they know and start using all the dirty tricks in reverse. Genthal's paper is as red as the guillotine—and he's fighting with his hired editor. There's one straw in the wind. When he went before that Committee tomorrow, he was going to talk, in a big way; that's what I thought and that's why I wanted him protected, but it wouldn't have done to give the game away by getting him a police guard. Since he has gone to the length of destroying his termite hobby, I'm sure of it. He was killed by some communist agent of his own local party before he could give away their secrets. Undoubtedly he had political dynamite under his belt."

"Except," I put in, "that no communist or anyone else could get near him. There wasn't anyone there."

"He couldn't have inflicted those wounds on himself," Tarrant pointed out. "You don't think the bar mallet floated through the air of its own accord, do you, Jerry?"

"Well. But damn it, how *could* anyone have killed him? It's impossible!"

'Hido reached for one of Tarrant's Dimitrinoes and lit it slowly. "Mebbe not impossible. Verry silent elevator, Misster Tarrant say. Tell pliss, Misster Jerry, how sit elevator when you come down from roof?"

"I don't get you."

"When you find body," explained 'Hido patiently, "you make search of roof, yiss? No one there. Then you come to elevator door on terrace. How sit elevator, up or down? You have to summon elevator from below, no?"

"No. The elevator was right there where I had left it. All I did was to open the door and get in."

The Filipino's face—it seemed to me it had held an anticipatory grin—fell sharply. So did his voice. "Oh. Thiss verry bad," he declared gloomily.

Tarrant looked puzzled, too. "We thought we had it worked out. But that stops us. There must be something you haven't told me, Jerry. There has to be."

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I assured him, "Not a thing."

"Well, let's go on to something else. Peake says they found a fishing rod in the living room and Genthal's servant claims he has never seen it before. What was Genthal doing with that fishing rod? *There* is something you didn't tell us about."

"I don't know." This seemed clutching at straws with a vengeance. "I suppose he fished with it. But he didn't have it in the living room. I found it in the elevator when I came down after he had been killed. I guess I tossed it somewhere in the living room; I've forgotten. And in any case what does it—"

"How long rod?" asked 'Hido. Carefully.

"Pretty long. I think it lay catercorner across the floor."

"Buttons!" cried 'Hido, jumping up. "We got him!"

"I believe we have," said Tarrant, and smiled.

What sort of talk was that? There aren't any buttons on fishing rods. And what if there were?

Peake came in after dinner, sat down and accepted a highball.

"This is a favor, Tarrant," he announced. "I'm busy and we're not getting anywhere. The communist angle's all right but there was no opportunity. It doesn't look too good for you, young man," he added in my direction.

That made me feel just fine, until Tarrant raised his glass. "God bless," he proposed. "I know your trouble, Peake; that's why I asked you to stop here on your way downtown. You have all the evidence you need, with one exception. Without that piece the crime's insoluble; with it you're in clover. Jerry just forgot to tell you about it."

"Is that so?" Peake grunted. He slid an unsavory glance toward me. "He hasn't just made it up, has he?"

Tarrant said kindly, "He isn't bright enough. Look here, Peake, you've got one anomaly in this case—"

"How do you mean, one? We've got plenty. We've got—"

"Yes, but one of them explains all the rest. Where did the fishing rod come from?"

"I don't know. We can't break down the servant. Apparently Genthal never fished in his life. Never had a rod."

"He never did. That's the payoff. Trace the rod and you've got the killer."

"But the rod was in the living room, not on the roof."

"No. It was in the elevator. That's what Jerry forgot to tell you.

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He found it there when he came down after discovering Genthal's body."

There was a pause. Peake asked, "So what?"—which fairly expressed my own sentiments.

"You haven't had a chance to think it over," Tarrant told him. "It clears the case up. You have a man who was never seen to leave—Mike, the man who came to grease the elevator cables in the morning. He brought the fishing rod in his 'big bag of tools' and he's your killer. Without doubt some of Genthal's former cronies had explained the layout of the premises to him. Jerry can give you a description and you tell me there's a print on the rod, too. Probably he took off his gloves after the murder; blood on them maybe. Unless it's Jerry's print, but *he* says he held it by the cork handle."

"If we accept this evidence of Phelan's, we shall have to accept the rest. He says there was no one but Genthal on the roof before or after the crime."

"That's his conclusion, not his evidence. He never looked on the awning when he searched the terrace. That awning was strong enough to hold me up and it was strong enough to hold up the murderer also, provided he stayed on the supports."

"So . . . Well, it's possible. Your idea is that the greasing was a sham and that the man concealed himself on the awning for a chance to make his attack? He could always have left peaceably, if he got no chance, I suppose. You're not home yet, though. How *did* he leave?"

"What is the difficulty? He slipped into the elevator while Jerry was searching the roof for the second time. After he had found Genthal dead. With Jerry behind some of those boxed hedges he could open and close the elevator door softly and the machine itself is almost noiseless; Jerry would never have noticed it going down, in the excitement of the search."

"But it didn't go down," I interrupted. "It was still there when I had finished. It was still at the terrace."

"No, it had *come back* to the terrace. You wouldn't have noticed that, either."

"I couldn't have seen it, since the outer door closes by itself when you get out. Well, all right; I'll admit I wouldn't have heard it."

Peake said, "But that's the impossibility. Sending the elevator back to the roof after anyone had gone down in it. The Up button

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has to be pressed from the *inside* of the elevator and *after* the doors have been closed. No one can send it up unless he comes up with it."

"Not even with a demountable fishing rod? Of course it can be done. You come down to the living-room level in the car. You open the doors. You brace the rod against the Up button. But with the doors open the car doesn't move. Leaving the button braced in, you step out and close the inner, grilled door, letting the outer door close by itself. There is a click and the elevator goes up. When it starts or when it stops with a jerk at the roof, the rod falls down on the floor. There is the elevator back at the terrace and Jerry gets in as if it had never moved. He's so disturbed that he doesn't even notice the rod on the floor until he gets down again. And up to now he hasn't had any idea what it meant."

Peake got up and drained his glass, setting it down empty on a taboret. "You have the damnedest ideas, Tarrant. But it's worth trying. I think we can trace the rod; and the field isn't large, in any case. He'll be sorry he left that fishing tackle."

"He couldn't help it, you see. And if Jerry hadn't been there, it wouldn't have counted for much against the opportunity of the servant on the premises. No one would have believed *his* story of a mysterious workman, sent from nowhere."

"No one," Peake remarked at the door, "particularly believed Jerry's. You had better let Tarrant run his own motorboats in the future, young man."

I said, "Thanks." It seemed like a good idea to me, too.

'Hido returned from letting Peake out. "Verry good episode," he remarked. "Episode of rod without fish on either end. Mebbe one fish get caught now, after all."

"Q"

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This is the 516th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . "Nothing else will work. Do you see that, Hogan? Hogan? Hogan!" . . .

The author, Andrew Wickstrom, is in his early thirties and married. After four years in the Navy he attended the University of Missouri where he earned degrees in English and journalism. His favorite relaxations are reading and writing, because they are "antidotes to my workaday diet of dismal facts"—he is the assistant copy chief of "The Virginian-Pilot" newspaper in Virginia Beach. He also relaxes studying films, often seeing three a day, and enjoys travel, gardening, and basking on "the world's longest resort beach" . . .

THE LAST ADVENTURE OF RIP DEBOLT

by ANDREW WICKSTROM

Ward Hogan looked at his watch. Nearly midnight. Three hours had elapsed since he'd sat down at his desk for what he had promised himself (and his editor) would be a marathon writing session. And he hadn't typed a single character.

Too many distractions! Another quarrel with Elaine, who had left in a snit to stay in town until "you start thinking about someone besides your precious self." An annoying call from Richard Hilton at Blackstone Books, pleading with him to wrap up the manuscript by next week. As if a few weeks mattered on a book that was already six months past delivery! Hilton was threatening to drive up and chain Hogan to the typewriter.

"Hilton," he had retorted, "as Rip DeBolt would say, 'That would be a dumb play, Waldo, dumb as death.' "

Hilton said, "Hey, Hogan, are you dry?" Hogan hung up.

Once again Hogan tried to focus his attention on the typewriter. He placed his fingertips, paused, waited. The churning rhythm of

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the rainstorm pressed in on him, the downpour that had been hissing hard and soft all day. Lord, the racket!

Abruptly Hogan stood up. He wrenched the blank paper from the typewriter, made a tight ball of it, and shot it into the wastebasket. Ah, progress at last, he chuckled; deserves a drink.

He crossed to the glass-doored liquor cabinet. Of course he had vowed no drinking until he had finished 20 pages, but that would be ridiculous at this point. The cogs needed lubrication. A warm Scotch, just a small one to start things humming. He pulled the knob. Locked. Thanks, Elaine, you're a jewel. But this lock is only a formality; a child with a hairpin could spring it.

Hogan went to their bedroom and started looking through the little boxes and trays on his wife's dresser. You do use hairpins, don't you, dear? Then where do you put them? He was rummaging through a drawer when the doorbell chimed. Several times. The repetition robbed the bell of its normal politeness. Hilton? What nerve!

In the foyer Hogan hit the light switch, then put an eye to the peephole. The caller was looking down, and Hogan could only see the crown of a dripping hat.

He swung open the door and was prepared to say something rude. But as he looked into the slate-gray eyes of the man in the limp raincoat, Hogan was struck speechless. ("His eyes were slate-gray, mean enough to make a snake slither for cover.") The man's nose was flat and a little askew. ("His nose had been broken five times. It had mended properly four times.") The straight thin line of lip began to bow into a smile, but Hogan detected no mirth there. ("He had a grim sort of smile that appeared when he was pleased, or more often when someone else was not pleased.")

Hogan was still spinning from the shock of recognition when the caller said in a rumbling bass, "Where are your manners, Waldo? Are you gonna let me in or do I invite myself?"

He stepped boldly into the foyer, walked solemnly past Hogan and down the hallway, leaving a wet trail. Hogan stared at the broad retreating back, and his surprise turned to admiration, for he now fully realized he was watching a marvelous personification of Rip DeBolt, Detective for Hire.

Hogan started to laugh. Oh, that crazy Hilton! Who said he had no imagination and was a better editor for the lack of it? He'd hired some actor who was big and ugly, dressed him up properly, and briefed him on a few DeBolt mannerisms—a visit from Rip

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himself, meant either to inspire Rip's creator to fresh endeavor or paralyze him with laughter. When Hogan caught up with Rip in the living room, the writer was wiping tears from his face and trying to relax his laugh-knotted stomach.

"Whew, Rip," he gasped out. "You know how to make an entrance."

Rip had seated himself in the brown leather chair. He had thrown his dripping raincoat and hat onto the white sofa. Hogan didn't like that; it was an expensive piece of furniture.

Rip said, "My usual entrance is to kick the door off its hinges"—he raised one leg and cocked it, showing size 12 brogans—"but your door is heavier than the ones I'm accustomed to."

Hogan laughed again. It was a great gag. He decided to play along for a while, to test this actor. "Fiction doors, Rip. They're just made for the purpose of being kicked in. And you never can be sure what's on the other side. Could be a corpse or a man with a gun. Could be the answer to a mystery or simply another question. In your world there could be anything behind those doors."

Rip grunted. "Except this time it's you. I musta got lost."

"You are lost, big man, and it's my fault." Hogan collected the hat and coat and put them in the hall closet. "I'm halfway through Rip DeBolt number sixteen, titled *Spy Swatter*. I'm having difficulty with the story, so you could say you're lost in a way. That's why Richard Hilton sent you up here, isn't it?"

Rip absently stroked the two-inch scar over his right eyebrow and hummed quietly deep in his throat. Hogan marveled at the little DeBolt "lost-in-thought" mannerism—perfect down to the tiny scar. ("Rip had a two-inch scar above his right eye. It was a white scar, but it turned scarlet when Rip was angry enough to choke someone.")

Rip said, "I want to talk about your difficulty. What do you say let's have a drink. I happen to know we both like Scotch, although I can never afford the label you buy."

"Don't sound so bitter about it," Hogan said, chuckling over how thoroughly this man knew his subject. Hogan wanted to get his name. If Hollywood ever makes another Rip DeBolt picture, this fellow deserves the lead. "You can't buy expensive booze. All wrong for your image. You're the kind of guy who isn't supposed to know the difference. Anyway, my liquor cabinet is locked and I haven't got the key."

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"I'll open it for you, Waldo." Rip got up and led the way to Hogan's study. The writer gestured at the desk, the file cabinets, and the room's book-lined walls. He said, "This is where you were born, Rip. Sixteen times." Rip said nothing; he was pondering the liquor cabinet.

"Forget your picks, Rip?"

"Don't carry picks, Hogan. You like me to travel light."

"Then how do you propose to—oh, no!"

Rip pulled a dingy wrinkled handkerchief from a back pocket and wrapped it around his fist. "Sorry about this. It's my image." Before Hogan could protest, one quick blow had shattered the glass of one door. Rip's hand withdrew holding an expensive bottle of eight-year-old whiskey. He hefted the bottle toward Hogan and said, "Cheers."

"Damn it all! You're letting this tough-guy role go to your head, whoever you are. You can tell Hilton for me that he can expect a bill for repairs."

"Who the hell is Hilton? C'mon, let's pour one. I'm so dry I can't spit." Rip tried a tight-lipped smile on him. Uncanny, that smile; just the way Hogan had always envisioned it. And smashing in to the liquor cabinet was certainly in character.

Hogan grumbled, then fetched tumblers and ice. Rip sprawled across the old sofa where Hogan would sometimes nap if he were in the midst of an extended session and day and night lost meaning. Hogan was left with nowhere to sit but at his desk.

Rip took a long pull at his drink and sighed with satisfaction. He said, "This is where you work."

Hogan regarded his guest in the Rip DeBolt costume: the rumpled gray glen-plaid suit, the carelessly knotted maroon tie, the unshined shoes. The hair was jet-black and cut close to the head, and from certain angles the scalp shone through. Hogan began to sense an element of mockery in the masquerade. The individual parts were correct, but taken together this Rip was something of a lout.

"You deduce correctly," Hogan said with a shade of sarcasm. "I write it all in here. Does that interest you? Are you a fan of my books, friend?"

"You misunderstand," said Rip. "I said this is where you work. I didn't say writing goes on in this room."

"Writing is work," Hogan said with gravity. "If you don't believe that, give up the acting trade and try it yourself."

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"Agreed, writing is work. But not all your work—published work—is writing. Perhaps none of it is." Rip emptied his glass and rose to take another Scotch.

"What nerve!" Hogan sputtered. "The actor is not content to play detective, he must also play literary critic. I swear, if Hilton—"

"I'm not an actor, Hogan. I'm only what you made me. Now let's get down to the reason for my visit." He strode to the bookcase nearest the desk. The top shelf held the complete DeBolt adventures, all paperbacks with spines uncracked by opening. "This number sixteen you're nursing. I want to tell you something that I've been told at least once in every one of these stories: If you know what's good for you, you'll drop this case."

Hogan was aghast. "I can't believe this."

"Yeah, those trite lines are miserably bad when you actually hear them. Maybe if you had tried out some of your dialogue, spoken it yourself aloud, the worst of it could have been junked." That devilish smile appeared again.

"All right, the charade is over. I refuse to stand for any more insults. If you do not leave immediately, I will consider you a trespasser and call the police." Hogan got to his feet. He intended to strike an intimidating pose, but the drink had made him slightly wobbly.

A coarse laugh rose from his antagonist. "Hogan, you're also a terrible drinker. You should never touch the stuff. As for me, I can drink all night, to judge by what you write. You've got me downing bottle after bottle, yet my senses never cloud and my aim never wavers."

Hogan kept a telephone on an end table next to the sofa. He picked up the receiver. "The problem is simply this, you fraud: you don't understand the conventions of the form." The receiver was silent. Hogan tapped the buttons in the cradle. Nothing.

"Speaking of conventions, Hogan, it seems the storm has knocked out the phone lines."

"Unlikely. Lines are put in the ground these days. Look, if you've cut off my telephone you're in serious trouble. I think you'd better knock it off."

"Cutting a phone line is serious trouble? Not for a man who has cut throats. You had me do that in *Pickled in Blood*. Or was it *Stick in Your Eye?* Probably both."

Rip helped himself to another round from the bottle and

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watched Hogan return dazedly to his seat.

"You've even read my books in preparation for this role, I see."

"Not exactly," said Rip. "I haven't lived them, either, in a way that you can understand. They're more like memories. I remember everything you've written about me but I haven't experienced it."

"That makes no sense."

"Well, think for a moment. You live in the present. I, however, am a creature of the past tense. As soon as you've written, 'His hand came up, and too late I saw the glint of a gun barrel. I dove and the shot went wild, but the little weasel got lucky because the ricochet caught me in the ankle. Then my Colt came out, and his luck ended,' and so on. That's a quote, by the way. *Untimely Ripped*. You write that and it's over in the flash of a thought. Funny thing, though; I get these scars." He lifted his left pants leg and showed Hogan a white splash of healed flesh close to the ankle.

Hogan told himself his visitor was undoubtedly a lunatic. Actors are all the time going off the deep end because they spend too much time pretending to be someone else. He was certain that only a fanatic would go to such lengths with makeup. The thought that he was seated across from a certifiable nut was agitating, but the man seemed docile enough. Maybe he could be lured into leaving.

"Rip, old man, I'm way behind on this project," he said, smiling warmly. "Maybe you could drop by next week when I've got things smoothed out. We could even go over the manuscript together."

The man on the sofa frowned. "You're slow to catch on, Waldo. I want you to stop writing about me. I want you to bump me off. It's The End."

"That can't be done, you ought to know that. You're a hero, and heroes go on forever."

"No!" It was a roar. Hogan gave a start at the sudden anger and felt a tremor of fear. He knew the great majority of sick people were harmless, but the fact didn't comfort him.

The gray eyes bore down and he felt very small beneath them. The voice was as hard and direct as the glare. "You label me a hero, but it won't stick. What's so blasted heroic about me? My game is brutality. My method on a case is to terrify every witness and every informer until I work my way down to the one who

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started all the grief. Chances are I snuff him. I'm no hero. I'm a perversion, a sadist's dream. You've made me so damn tough I'm inhuman."

Hogan's resentment was building up. Crazy or not, this intruder's behavior was galling, and there were some kinds of insults he would not tolerate. He placed a shaky hand next to the half-empty bottle on his desk and spread out his fingers toward it casually.

"Call my books what you will," he said. "But they sell. Anyway, aren't you slipping out of character? Rip DeBolt thinks much too well of himself to say the things you do."

"Wrong," Rip said. "Ward Hogan is the one who thinks too well of himself. Rip knows better because he lives in a special place in the back of a reader's mind where he rubs elbows with the true hard-boiled dicks. The founding fathers, you might say. They have style, wit, insight. They make your murderous old Rip ashamed of himself."

Abruptly Hogan bolted from his chair and snatched up the bottle by its neck. Breathing heavily with the excitement, he held it like a club and took a step toward his visitor. "Shut up!" he bellowed. "I swear I'll break your head if you don't get out of here!"

This time Rip's smile was so broad that his teeth were bared. Hogan tried not to waver in the face of the cruel grin he had so often described. The attempt was unsuccessful. In what seemed like slow motion, the man on the sofa sat up and moved his right hand behind his back. Instantly Hogan recognized the movement, but it was too late. The hand emerged holding a flat black Colt .45.

"Ever have one of these pointed at your gut, Hogan? Of course you haven't." The writer's anger had fled, and in its place was raw fear. It hadn't occurred to him that this maniac would have a gun, a .45 automatic kept, just like Rip's, in a holster in the small of his back. Hogan staggered backward into his chair, visibly quaking.

"Frightened, Hogan?" Rip asked solicitously. "Damn right you are. Guns scare people. Except me, that is, in your stories, where that peculiar deadly calm comes over me when I'm ready to blast someone. The way you tell it, I even enjoy watching the last minutes of a man's life tick by."

Hogan closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the baleful weapon directed at him. With an effort he found his voice. "You,

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whoever you are, you're a very sick man. But you can be helped. I can—"

Rip cut in. "No, no, the damage is done. Your opinion that I'm sick is shared by most reviewers, as you would know if you read the reviews. But that wouldn't stop you from finishing number sixteen."

"Don't you see that I really have no choice? It's contracted for, I've long since spent the advance. —Wait!" Hogan brightened and began to speak animatedly. "*Spy Swatter* is the last of three I'm committed to do. Instead of negotiating for future titles, I'll just make this the last Rip DeBolt adventure! That's all you want, isn't it, to be laid to rest? It would be easy enough."

Hogan yanked open a deep drawer on the left side of the desk and withdrew a stack of paper, his incomplete DeBolt manuscript. The first two pages were an outline, which he scanned intently. "Look, I could rearrange this a little, write in a new character as a framing device, someone to introduce the story and finish it off after Rip exits. In fact, the idea appeals to me as a sort of challenge."

Hogan picked up a pencil and began to make hurried notes on the outline, crossing out lines and writing in the margins. The need to write it all down surged in him as it hadn't in years, and he smiled as he worked in silent welcome to the long-ago feeling.

The man with the gun continued to sit very still, his gaze on the floor. With his free hand he absently stroked the scar over his right eyebrow and hummed quietly. When he looked up at Hogan, scribbling at his desk, his face seemed troubled.

"No," he muttered, as if speaking to himself. "It wouldn't work. You'd need the dough and bring me back."

It appeared that Hogan hadn't heard the man, because he was still scribbling away with his back to the sofa.

"Hogan, it's got to be a suicide. Nothing else will work. Do you see that, Hogan? Hogan? Hogan!"

The writer turned to look just as the gun came up to eye level.

The lieutenant was dismayed to see that his men had tracked mud all through the house, but on second thought it seemed not to matter.

"He's in here," called the sergeant from a doorway beyond the living room. The lieutenant walked over to join him, passing the woman on the white sofa who lay crumpled in sedation.

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The body, covered with a sheet, was on the floor by the desk. A flat black Colt .45 was next to it.

The sergeant said, "Guy was a writer. We weren't able to get much from the wife except he was having a hard time on this book and that she'd decided to move out until he was through with it. She called last night several times and he didn't answer, so this morning she drives up and she finds him."

The lieutenant bent down and drew the sheet from the corpse's head. "The usual way," said the sergeant. "Lead lollipop. And he left a suicide note, sort of." He pointed to the piece of paper in the typewriter. "Guy was out of his mind, all right."

The lieutenant leaned over the typewriter and read these words: "It appeared that Hogan hadn't heard me, because he was still scribbling away with his back to the sofa. I said, 'Hogan, it's got to be a suicide. Nothing else will work. Do you see that, Hogan? Hogan? Hogan!'

"The creep turned to look just as I brought the gun up to eye level."

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER
by OTTO PENZLER

ODD: Two magazines which should interest those with a fondness for mystery *and* fantasy fiction are the *Doc Savage Club Reader* and *Fantasy Mongers.* Devoting its pages to articles about pulp-magazine fiction in general and Doc in particular, the *Doc Savage Club Reader* is an amateur but nonetheless enjoyable little newsletter published by Frank Lewandowski, 2438 S. Highland Ave., Berwin, IL 60402. The first four issues are still available as a set for $4.00; current issues are $1.50 each. *Fantasy Mongers* is new and still unseen, but the first issue is offered free to anyone interested enough to write and ask for one, so you can make your own decision. Just drop a card to W. Paul Ganley, Weirdbook Press, Box 35, Amherst Branch, Buffalo, NY 14226.

ODDER: It's getting so that you have to be afraid for an old favorite character to be the subject of a new book, play, or movie which becomes successful, lest the world be suddenly flooded with endless imitations and copies, almost always less worthwhile than the original. Nicholas Meyer was largely responsible for the Sherlock Holmes deluge with his skillful *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* a few years back, and Edward Gorey brought *Dracula* to the New York stage and the Prince of Darkness became so omnipresent that no one could count all the Dracula-related material that came flying at us from every direction. Now Fred Saberhagen has covered all the bases with *The Holmes-Dracula File* (Ace, $1.95), which fails only to include Darth Vader and Bruce the Shark. Despite its opportunistic use of Holmes, Dracula, and the Giant Rat of Sumatra, it's not as terrible as it sounds. I wouldn't rank it among the top 100 books of the year, but then I couldn't help but finish it, either, which says something for any book.

ODDEST: Among those of us with a proclivity for the macabre and the more-than-slightly bizarre, Gahan Wilson stands alone as a monument to the deliciously evil. That is to say, Gahan Wilson

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doesn't, but his artwork does. *He* seems quite normal, but his eerie cartoons are so grimly droll that no mystery fan who regards himself as well read can afford to overlook him. His work, that is. *"...and then we'll get him!"* (Richard Marek, $12.95 cloth, $4.95 paper) must be seen to be appreciated. (A blindfolded man in front of a firing squad says, "Me and my big mouth"; plumbers in the giant tentacled grip of a green monster tell their client, "Well, we've found out what's been clogging up your drains!") Get a copy and have fun, or give it to a friend with a genuine zany streak.

ODDS AND ENDS: Michael Gilbert's new novel, *The Empty House* (Harper & Row, $10.00) involves Israelis and Palestinians but, in the hands of this intelligent and polished writer, the story is fresh and does not seem like merely another variation on a familiar theme; Dorothy Hughes, rediscovered after a long period of relative inactivity, will see virtually all of her mystery fiction reprinted in paperback during the year; it's too early to be specific, but the works of Christianna Brand, that master of fair-play detection, soon will be available in new paperback editions; the complete Philo Vance saga of a dozen novels, out of print for many years, will be published in new hardcover editions at the end of the year.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Father Brown in New York? G. K. Chesterton's impish little priest-detective has already been portrayed on the screen—played by Walter Connolly, Alec Guinness, Kenneth More, and others—but always in native English settings. Now an upcoming NBC-TV feature transforms him into an *American* cleric, pastor of a small Manhattan parish church! We first meet *Father Brown, Detective* (in the script by veteran telewriters Don M. Mankiewicz and Gordon Cotler) jogging in Riverside Park with his dog Rabelais keeping pace alongside him. Soon he is involved in the murder of a steeldrummer in Central Park's bird sanctuary and some curious attempts to frighten a young actress (Kay Lenz) he has befriended which culminate in the fatal shooting of her understudy during the performance of a play. Not quite the dull-seeming, pudding-faced priest that Chesterton conceived, this Brown—as portrayed by Tony Award-winning actor Barnard Hughes—is wry and wise, tall and ascetic. He was once "assistant chaplain at Sing Sing," is

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helpless about keeping the parish accounts, must hold an auction to repair his Saint Eustacius Church's leaking roof, and is the despair of his gruff, practical Monsignor ("You're a religious man, but not a shepherd!"). In mystery matters, though, he shines. Admiring police officers make tantalizing references to past crimes which the priest has helped solve: cases involving twin jugglers, a phone-booth murder, a body found on a Mexican airplane. They all sound far more interesting than the current case, the solution of which seems quite inconsequential, and without the mystical presence of evil often sensed so strongly in Chesterton. But in his American television debut the good father is rather endearing as he goes about solving crimes, thanks to a deep insight into human nature and murderers' souls.

Mystery stage enthusiasts *must* add to their bookshelves the new Agatha Christie anthology, *The Mousetrap and Other Plays* (Dodd, Mead, $12.95), for it contains three of the most celebrated modern chillers in British drama: *Ten Little Indians, Witness for the Prosecution,* and the title play. (Indeed, London's *Mousetrap,* now in its 26th year, is the longest-running hit in theater history.) Ira Levin — himself a successful playwright whose *Deathtrap* has settled down to long runs both in New York and London — makes some interesting observations about Miss Christie's craftsmanship in his introduction to the collection. She turned to playwriting as a sort of holiday from her book-a-year routine, and because when others adapted her works for the stage they "stuck far too closely to the original book" ("a rare complaint for a novelist, believe me," Levin adds). All the intricate plots and red herrings had to be simplified and refashioned. As a result, *Ten Little Indians*—a complex and eventful thriller brilliantly dramatized—is significantly changed just before the closing curtain. *Witness for the Prosecution*—which Christie considered her best play, and the only mystery ever to win the New York Drama Critics Award—had an altered ending from the short story on which it was based, adding one more surprise to an already startling *denouement.* She ruthlessly eliminated her Belgian detective from her stage versions of three Poirot novels, dropping him from *Appointment with Death, The Hollow,* and *Go Back for Murder.* Many of her strong women characters are muted resemblances to Christie herself — the spurned sculptress in *The Hollow,* for instance, is given lines to say which can also be read in the Christie autobiography. The eight plays (*Towards Zero* and *Verdict* are also included), six of which have never before been published in anything but acting editions, are stunningly full of civilized shivers and surprises, and spotlight the fact that the most widely read mystery novelist of our time was as well a major figure in the theater world.

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INTERVIEW: AARON MARC STEIN

Writing a book and having it published is a major achievement. Producing two or three dozen books is often a lifetime's occupation.

This month Aaron Marc Stein celebrates the publication of his one hundredth full-length book, *The Rolling Heads* (Doubleday, $7.95) under his own name; he is also the prolific George Bagby and Hampton Stone.

EQMM: How can you—or anyone—write a hundred books?

STEIN: Because they come.

EQMM: How?

STEIN: I don't know.

EQMM: Do ideas just pop into your head, or do you sit down at the typewriter, face a blank page, and say, "Okay, now what do I do?"

STEIN: Only three times have books come where I was aware of the trigger—a situation, a person, an incident, or something that I can look back on and say, "Yes, that started it." Otherwise, I simply do not know. Sometimes, when my mind is not occupied with anything else, the germ of an idea will turn up. Ordinarily this happens when I am in the middle of another book. By the time I have finished the final draft of the book I'm working on (without really working on it at all, because I am concerned with the book that is in the typewriter) I find that in those idle moments—riding a bus, shaving, waiting to fall asleep – the idea will come back to me with more attached to it. Frequently, as I finish a book, the last of it gets to be rather a burden because there is this other story sitting in my mind which is fresh, sounds as if it would be more fun to do, and which I'm eager to get at.

EQMM: Then, like Alexandre Dumas, who merely drew two lines after the end of one novel and started the next on the same sheet of paper, you don't break stride?

STEIN: I like to keep going because I've found that if I do take any considerable time out between finishing a book and starting the next, I will probably sit at the typewriter and write for a day, a week, two weeks – throwing away everything I wrote the day before. If I stay in the saddle and start one immediately after finishing the preceding one, it floats.

EQMM: Almost all your books have series characters.

STEIN: As far as the mysteries are concerned, there has only been one in the lot that didn't have a series character, and that's only because I got a story idea that just wouldn't fit a series character. It wasn't really a whodunit; it was a suspense novel. The reason for that is largely commercial. You build a following for a detective. You run into people who say to you, "You write detective stories or mysteries? What's your name?" They draw a blank. "Well, what are the names of

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some of the books you wrote?" That draws a blank. Inspector Schmidt? Matt Erridge? "Oh, yes, I read those all the time!" For some reason, readers of detective stories and mysteries don't seem to remember authors' names or book titles, but they remember characters. You'd have a hard time remembering the titles of many Nero Wolfe books, say, but everyone has heard of him.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Julian Symons must be counted as one of the mystery-writing fraternity's most versatile members. Outside the field, he is respected as a poet, critic, editor, biographer, and historian. Within it, he has been all of these and an outstanding novelist and short-story writer as well. From his first mystery, the complicated, satirical, now more-or-less disowned pure detective story, *The Immaterial Murder Case* (1945), to his novel of a would-be Sherlock Holmes, *A Three-Pipe Problem* (1975), he has written nearly every type of crime novel, never repeating himself and always entertaining and enlightening his readers.

The past year has seen publication of Symons' biography of Edgar Allan Poe, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Harper and Row, $10.95), a fine study of the Father of the Detective Story, and his first new novel in three years.

**** Julian Symons: *The Blackheath Poisonings,* Harper and Row, $9.95. I believe this documentary-style account of an upper-class Victorian murder case is Symons' first historical detective novel, though he has written about true crime cases of the past. The novel is marked by a fine sense of period, expert characterization, and a cunningly clued fair-play puzzle. It offers more proof that Symons is one of the best.

*** Reginald Hill: *A Pinch of Snuff,* Harper and Row, $9.95. In Hill's second U.S. appearance, Yorkshire police Dalziel and Pascoe solve a case involving dentists, feminism, and porno filmmaking. In the end, the guilt is well distributed among the large cast, which resolution is undeniably true to life but disconcerting to detective-story traditionalists who like to see a single culprit unmasked. The novel is well written, readable, and involving, but the best of Hill has still to cross the water. (Watch for titles like *A Clubbable Woman, An Advancement of Learning,* and *A Fairly Dangerous Thing.*)

*** Ronald Wilcox: *The Rig,* Leisure Books, $1.95. A new writer and a comparatively obscure publisher bring forth a real sleeper, including an insider's picture of the world of truckers, an interesting catalog of CB slang, some

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well-realized characters and scenes, and a nicely done fox-and-hounds finale. Though under-edited and rough around the edges, *The Rig* delivers a genuine story-telling talent.

*** Pete Hamill: *Dirty Laundry*, Bantam, $2.25. The first novel about free-lance reporter Sam Briscoe is a creditable, well-executed action story set mainly in Mexico.

At its best, the macho-pretentious prose recalls John D. MacDonald, at its worst an entry in the Harry's Bar imitation Hemingway contest. (This is not a book for animal lovers: Briscoe has an unfortunate proclivity for dog-poisoning.)

*** R. R. Irvine: *Horizontal Hold*, Popular Library, $1.75. A much-hated anchor man is blown to bits in the studios of Channel 3 to begin the third recorded case of mood-crazed TV reporter Bob Christopher. Irvine's style is distinctive, and he does nice things with his L.A. background. (This *is* a book for animal lovers: Christopher refuses to evict a family of raccoons who have nested in his roof.)

* Richard Sapir and Warren Murphy: *Last Call*, Pinnacle, $1.50. The latest satirical thriller (#35) in the Destroyer series, written as always with one eye on the morning paper, is a gory but funny situation comedy of world politics and espionage, starting with the overzealous cost-cutting measures of a new C.I.A. chief. The violence is a bit of a bore but less frequent than in more straight-faced bloodbath series (Executioner, Death Merchant, etc.).

** Charles Merrill Smith: *Reverend Randollph and the Fall from Grace, Inc.*, Putnam, $8.95. Smith, whose Chicago-based clerical detective stories remind me more of Emma Lathen than of Harry Kemelman, is generally strong on pace, style, and humor, but weak on characterization (cartoonish outside of some of the continuing characters) and mystery plotting (the main misdirection is so heavy-handed most readers will see through it a good hundred pages before Randollph does).

** Philippe van Rjndt: *The Trial of Adolf Hitler*, Summit Books, $9.95. It was inevitable someone would write a novel in which Hitler survives World War II and is tried for his crimes. For most of the way, this what-if entry is intelligent and suspenseful, but the trial itself is a terrible disappointment, with no sense of legal procedure and the cat-and-mouse of good courtroom fiction lost amid the speechifying and historical lectures. For Nazi buffs, okay. Trial buffs, please avoid.

** Fred Saberhagen: *The Holmes-Dracula File*, Ace, $1.95. Before you recoil in justifiable horror at the prospect of yet another Sherlock Holmes pastiche, yet another Dracula book, let it be said that Saberhagen (a well-regarded s.f. writer) has done a better job here than the title might suggest. Not quite good enough, however, for high marks this late in the fad.

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DETECTIVERSE

LADIES' MAN

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

"Not guilty," insisted one crook
With his hand outstretched on the Book.
"I've been collared by men
And served time in the pen,
But this time I was plainly Ms. took!"

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"Have you any idea how many undiscovered murders occur in a nation of fifty-five million people in one year?" . . . a beautifully constructed story about an ex-policeman's dilemma . . .

GIRLS, LIKE WHITE BIRDS

by ***WILLIAM BANKIER***

As I sit here on the train and remember how my troubles began, I think of the reason they gave for dropping me from the London Police. They said I was unstable, but it isn't so. I saw a fellow officer taking money from the proprietor of a Soho porn shop, so I spoke up. When it continued, I wrote an official complaint. Later I sent a letter to a weekend newspaper.

Eventually some important careers were terminated with prison sentences. But that was years ahead; the immediate result of my crusade was that I myself was cut adrift.

At first I pretended I was happy. No more punch-ups with football hooligans who like to have a bash at a blue uniform. And no more inserting myself between fascists and communists who run their parades down the same street. I took a job as a security man at the Fairfield Club, a gambling casino near Grosvenor Square. My job was to keep an eye on our crafty dealers. My resistance to bribery pleased management but not the blokes running the games. A few of them arranged a surprise party for me in the lane where I parked my car. They broke my jaw and my left arm. My face still looks warped at the bottom.

This was when Laura told me I was mad. "You must be daft," she said. "You rocked the boat for nothing and they sacked you from the Force. Now you go preaching on the dealers and what for? Look at you, you can't even eat. You'll be weeks drinking through that glass tube. And all they were doing was a small fiddle, taking a few quid off the top. The casino can afford it."

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She went her own way not long after and I will confess, I was lonely at first. For a time after I left Fairfield I worked for Securiteam, the company that supplies guards to order. It was like being back on the Force except the uniform was pale blue and the pay was better. But they were an undisciplined bunch, posing on the pavement during a cash pickup, pistols dangling, one hip higher than the other, and always the cheap sunglasses. Not a proper haircut in the whole regiment, either. I could not resign soon enough.

So after a long period on the dole I've ended up living in the coastal village of Rottingdean. It is situated on low ground just east of the headlands three miles from the seaside resort of Brighton. The cobbled streets are in excellent repair, the ancient brick and stone walls are good for another few centuries, the painted doorways gleam like the bodies of new automobiles.

Rudyard Kipling used to live here. He wrote that you will be a man if you can keep your head while all about you are losing theirs. But what about those poor girls who disappeared? They were not permitted to keep their heads. Three of them, the record says, although I counted four skulls. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I work as night watchman and handyman for the town museum, a job I obtained through the recommendation of Sergeant Barry Henley, a former colleague of mine in London, retired now and living in Brighton. I got in touch with him when my money and my pride ran out and he told me about the position. Now that I have it, I see him once in a while for a drink.

"Do you ever miss London?" I asked him on the first get-together two years ago. We were sitting in Barry's upstairs room with windows on two sides of us. Ahead I could see the wide gray sweep of the English Channel. Barry was perched on the edge of a sofa, a thin dry man with rusty hair too stubborn to go gray. "Ever wish you were back in Piccadilly Circus on a summer night?"

"Only when I remember the girls. Then I miss it," Barry said. "Cor, those Asian girls wouldn't half make a man weep."

As if she had been listening in the corridor, Barry's wife pushed the door open and let herself in. Her name was Belva and she had a steely glint in her eye that went with the edge in her voice. She stayed only long enough to advise her mate not to forget some household chores he was to attend to while she was out. He gave

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her a series of nods and called her "My old love." Then, when she was gone, he canceled it by showing me half a smile.

We both had another pint of ale, and at four o'clock Barry fetched up the binoculars from a closet beside the sofa. They were big, black, official-looking things, the sort of glasses you see in a film, pressed to the face of a German Field Marshal.

"Step over here," he said, moving to the side window. "I hear the girls at play."

I followed him and looked over his shoulder as he stared through the binoculars, adjusting the focus. I could see in the distance across some open ground a playing field with white-clad figures moving across it, and behind them, a massive building with a slate roof.

"There we are," Barry said, handing the glasses to me. "Feast your eyes on that."

I looked and saw a group of girls in white shorts and white blouses. They were playing field hockey and I noted their serious expressions as they gripped the curved sticks, and I admired their strong legs made thick by woolen stockings. But what impressed me most was the fresh beauty of their youthful faces, and the swing of clean hair.

"The girls of Samley College," my old mate whispered behind me, the husky voice reminding me of nights on duty back in Piccadilly. "Not as posh as Roedean down the highway. Not as expensive either, I reckon."

I watched long enough to show my appreciation and then handed the binoculars back to Barry. Without magnification, the figures became once again a flock of white birds on a green field. Barry gave them the scrutiny of a connoisseur, stopping only when the sound of the front door opening and closing warned of the return of Belva.

She came upstairs and complained, "Haven't you done anything I asked you to?" Then, as if she felt the situation had to be justified, she said to me, "We used to have somebody to help around here. But it's no use. I can't keep a woman in the house with him in residence."

I rationed my visits to the Henley household after that. Instead, I saw Barry alone from time to time at a pub in Brighton. It bothered me, the way Belva was able to push Barry around with no response from him. He was nobody's patsy; I knew this from working with him. It was as if she had some invisible control.

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My other pub, my local, is on a side street in Rottingdean. I expect I'll go there when this train ride is over and I've done what I have to do. They all know me there and give me greeting, but the man I have most of my daily conversation with is an old chap named Grinstead. He is the man who told me about the missing girls. I was only half listening that day and I had to say, "I'm sorry. What were you saying?"

"I was recalling those girls who disappeared from Samley College. Three of them. They were Asian girls, from Sri Lanka." Grinstead shook his head. "Nobody even thinks of them today. Except their families, I suppose."

"How did they disappear?"

"If we knew that, we'd know what happened to them. Pretty things—I remember the photos in the press. At first it was imagined they'd run off with men. But they ought to have surfaced before now."

"But three girls can't just disappear. It's hard enough for one person to drop out of sight, let alone three. And if they're dead, that means three bodies."

"It's a big planet," Grinstead said. "It can absorb a lot of corpses. Have you any idea how many undiscovered murders occur in a nation of fifty-five million people in one year?"

"Three girls, gone from the face of the earth. It's hard to accept."

"Of course it is." Grinstead's last word on the matter was convincing. "Had they been English girls, I expect the search might have lasted longer."

Another six months went by. I dusted the exhibits in the museum and ran the polisher over the floors. At night I went to bed and thought of myself as hero in situations I could control. Sometimes I remembered good times with Laura and tortured myself by wondering where she was. Once I awoke in my grave and screamed my way up through the blankets covering my head.

When Barry and Belva went away for a month to visit her family in York before the height of the tourist season, I saw them off at Brighton station. Belva was buying a magazine, so Barry and I were alone in the queue at Track 8. He offered me a key to his house. "Take it," he said. "You'll be doing me a favor."

"All right," I said. "I'll look in once in a while."

"Use the binoculars, too," he said. "Feel free. The girls look even better when you're alone."

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I remembered Grinstead's story and I felt an uneasy pang. There was something nasty about old Barry ogling the girls from Samley College and then three of them going missing. I pocketed the key as Belva returned with a copy of a tabloid newspaper.

"Look at the filth they print," she said, indicating the headline.

"Turn to page three," Barry grinned. "Where the pin-ups are."

It was over a week before I found the time to check the Henley residence. I let myself in and spent a few minutes in the silent rooms, opening a window here and there. The top-floor room came last and when I looked out at the college I was relieved to see the playing field unoccupied.

But there was something different about the view. The green area between Barry's house and the playing field was now being converted to long brown stripes by a man following a plow drawn by a powerful draft horse. And the most interesting sight of all was the parade of white sea birds following the plowman. They were gulls, and they were moving in a line down the fresh furrow, feeding on insects uncovered by the steel blade.

I was intrigued and when I had closed the windows, I left the house by the back door and went to have a word with the plowman. He was unhitching the horse.

"It looks like hot work," I said.

He nodded. "I reckon I'll leave the rest till after the pub closes."

I turned to observe the gulls. "Interesting to see the birds feeding like that."

"They're clever," the plowman said. "They know more about what's in the ground than we do." As he led the horses away, he said, "Are you a friend of Mr. Henley?"

"Yes."

"Nice man. He's spending a lot of money to surprise his wife."

"Oh?"

"She's a farm girl, he tells me. Always had her own plot under cultivation up north. When they come back from their holiday, this whole area will be ready for her to plant."

I watched him move to the shade of an elm tree at a corner of the field where he tethered the horse and hung a feed bag on its head. Then he waved and passed through a gap in the hedge.

I turned to study the birds again and was in time to see them take to the air and wheel away in the direction of the sea. Curious as to what they had been eating, I walked along the fresh furrow, but the exposed insects had all been eaten or else had bur-

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rowed their way to safety in the moist soil.

The turned earth felt good underfoot and I walked an irregular track this way and that. It was awkward stepping over the furrows; then my shoe came down on what seemed to be a rock and it sent me sliding off balance. I glanced at whatever it was. I crouched and worked it out of the earth. It was not a rock—it was a human skull.

I searched a few yards of that furrow and the ones adjoining. By the time I had found three skulls, my suspicions were confirmed. When I found a fourth, I did not know what to think. Obviously the police would have to be told. But what if the killer was Barry Henley? Suddenly I understood the relationship between him and his wife; she knew what he had done and controlled him by keeping his secret.

I was in a difficult position. It was my duty to step forward and present my evidence. But how could I align myself with Belva Henley in putting away for life one of the few friends I had in the world? I decided to wait at least until I could speak to Barry.

When the Henleys returned, I telephoned Barry and met him at our Brighton pub. He knew something had happened. "What is it, old son?" he said. "I see the honest man inside you trying to get out." He massaged his left arm. "And it must be said, it's a frightening spectacle."

I told him the whole story—the furrows, the birds, the skulls, my suspicions. He was remarkably calm. "That's where she put the bodies, then," he said. "I was never sure what she did with them. I got drunk." He laughed. "It explains her reaction today when she saw the plowed field. First thing she said was she wants to do all the planting herself."

I was having difficulty believing him. "You mean that Belva—"

"Yes. I used to be worse in those days. I watched the girls when she was in the room. Told her the ones I fancied." He shrugged. "I suppose you could say it was me who killed them, in a way. But Belva did it. Brought them here and fed them poisoned tea."

"Three school girls vanished," I said. "I saw four skulls."

A dead expression appeared in Barry's eyes. "Yes," he said. "The other was the girl we had staying with us. A sort of helper, a friend of mine from London. Too good a friend, according to my loving wife."

We said nothing for a few minutes, allowing the lively pub atmosphere to echo around us. A boy at the dart board threw triple

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twenty-three times in rapid succession. A collie dog shambled in from the street and went out again.

"Barry," I said quietly, "you were as much a cop as I was. You're sitting on evidence of murder here. Why don't you go to the police?"

"It's complicated," he said.

"No, it isn't, it's dead simple. You don't even like the woman."

"Worse than that," he said. "There's her money. She keeps it in her own account. You don't think I bought my house on a policeman's pension, do you?"

"If they arrest Belva for murder," I said, "won't her money go to you?"

"No, sir," Barry said. "She'd probably get life imprisonment, be out in ten years with good behavior, and her account would lie dormant till then."

I made up my mind to wait a little longer before going to the police. I thought of Laura and decided to find her and discuss it with her—about us, about the Henleys and the dead girls, about what I should do now that it was I, not just my old partner, who was an accessory after the fact. Laura's advice would set me on the right road.

So I traveled up to London and went from address to address, tracking down the girl who had left me and taken my luck with her. It would have been better had I never started. I located a landlady at a roominghouse in South Kensington. She had information as to Laura's whereabouts.

"Can't say where she is today," the woman told me, "but I can tell you where she went when she left here. She went to Brighton to stay with a retired policeman. Said he was a friend of her former husband. Said she'd be taken care of there."

Now I am on the train heading back to the south coast. I've been watching the stations going by—Clapham Junction, West Croydon, Gatwick—knowing I have to decide what to do. It ought to be simple. Surely the only procedure is to call on the police and tell them what I know. But I have this feeling that Belva's punishment is something I must attend to myself.

Three more stops before Brighton. Still time to make up my mind. But whatever I do, I'll have the rest of my life to go on asking myself the unanswerable question. Of those four pathetic skulls I picked up and held and then buried again, which one was once my Laura?

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a *NEW* short story by

AARON MARC STEIN

Aaron Marc Stein, alias George Bagby, creator of Inspector Schmidt whose feet are always killing him, and a.k.a. Hampton Stone, creator of Assistant D.A. Jeremiah X. "Gibby" Gibson, has written, at this point in time, 100 novels—a prodigious performance. His only short story in EQMM until now was "This Was Willi's Day," in our issue of December 1956—more than twenty years ago! (Yes, it has taken your Editor that long to persuade Mr. Stein to write another story for EQMM—Perseverance is our middle name, and besides, Mr. Stein was too busy writing novels!).

More than twenty years—so we are entitled to repeat ourselves. "Stamped and Self-Addressed," like Mr. Stein's first story in EQMM, is "vivid . . . with a full-bodied, penetrating characterization" . . .

STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED

by AARON MARC STEIN

It began as the most ordinary of mornings—ordinary office routine and standard office absurdity. There was nothing to give warning, but wouldn't it necessarily be that way? If those things come at all, they must come as a bolt from the blue. People kept asking me if I didn't find it scary to think that I held it in my hands. They thought it might just as easily have been me, that only by a fluke it wasn't.

That, of course, was nonsense. It could never have been me, not the way he had things set up. There's an irony in that, his bringing it on himself. He was dead and I wasn't only because of his office rules, those rules that had been a constant offense to me, a daily insult.

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It was the procedure he'd laid down for the handling of his mail. For the most part he had me doing what any secretary does. I opened the mail and sorted it. I discarded the junk stuff and stacked the rest in order of priority. The letters that were to be left unopened, the ones he insisted on opening himself? It isn't on every job that a guy runs into that, but it happens. It can be just anything that looks as though it might be personal or stuff that carries certain specific return addresses or even envelopes of a special color or ones that give off a special perfume.

A secretary's job is a position of trust. The trust doesn't need to go so far that a man will be made privy to his boss's private life. That would be asking too much; but when trust is so much withheld that a man's honesty is brought into constant question, that is giving too little.

The daily insult? That was it. All mail that came to him in his own or his wife's stamped, self-addressed envelopes had to be set aside unopened. It wasn't that I was not to know what those stamped, self-addressed envelopes contained. It was that he wouldn't trust me with their contents. They were theater tickets, tickets to the opera, to the ballet, to concerts. True enough, the gal who preceded me in the job had been tempted beyond resistance by a pair for a Baryshnikov opening night. So he fired her and that was fair enough. You don't keep a thief in a position of trust.

I came in as her replacement. He'd never had a male secretary before. With me he made the change. There was no sense to it. On the one hand he seemed to be thinking that honesty might be a matter of gender, but on the other he told me right off in the interview that all his own or his wife's stamped, self-addressed envelopes were to be left unopened. He dealt with those himself. He'd had a bad experience, he said, with his previous secretary. He was not going to subject me to the same temptation. I had access to the office safe and to the vault at the bank. I handled the office petty cash, but a pair of tickets—center and on the aisle—to some cultural clambake I wouldn't be caught dead at—with those I wasn't to be trusted.

I called it the daily insult. Of course, those mail-order tickets wouldn't be coming in every day, but he and his wife went to just about everything that hit town and he always ordered the tickets by mail. Two or three times a week there would be some in the mail, and even on days when there were none the insult was

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there. I had to watch for them. I had to be careful not to slip and maybe open one by mistake.

That last morning there were three of them. It was never any problem spotting them. They were always addressed by hand, written either by him or his wife, and I was familiar with their handwriting. Also when you have two envelopes of the same size and you are enclosing one inside the other, you can't get it in without folding it. I could recognize those envelopes blind. I'd feel the creases where they had been folded.

I did as I always did with them, putting the unopened envelopes on top of the stack of opened and sorted mail. I didn't see him come in. It would be that morning my gut would pick for acting up a little. I'd gone down the hall to the Men's. I was in there washing my hands when it happened.

At that remove and with four closed doors between, it sounded far away, big but distant. It could have been thunder, but thunder doesn't set up a tidal wave in the wash basin to slosh soapy water all over a guy's pants. Maybe I should have shown some curiosity about what had happened but, if I was feeling any, it was wiped out by my immediate problem. I was soaking wet and in the most embarrassing part of my clothes.

I mopped at myself with paper towels, but they didn't do much good. If anything, they made me look worse. They left me still wet but white with paper-towel fluff as well. I had to give up on it and come out as I was. After all, I was on the job. I couldn't spend the whole morning in the Men's waiting for my pants to dry.

I needn't have worried. Nobody noticed. Nobody even looked at me. There was plenty else to look at. All over the floor of the corridor there was the glitter of shattered glass and all up and down the corridor you could see right into the offices. There wasn't one door that still had its frosted-glass panel. Every last one of them had been blown out or maybe blown in. The bomb experts talked a lot about explosion and implosion and I never did get straight which was where.

Anyhow it was a bomb. The building security men were there and the police had joined them. The cops tried to back me away but the security men knew me. They identified me and I was allowed to go into the office. The outer room wasn't too bad. There was shattered glass all over everything and with the glazing out of all the window frames there were all kinds of drafts we don't usually have. That meant loose papers blowing about. They might

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have been knocked off my desk by the blast or it could have been no more than the wind coming in where the glass was gone.

The inner office was unrecognizable. His desk had been reduced almost to splinters and the pieces were scattered everywhere. The blast had been followed by fire. It seemed to me that everything in there that hadn't been demolished stood buried under a mantle of extinguisher foam. I had to look at him. I could take that. I won't say I'd seen any worse back when I was in Nam, but I'd seen plenty as bad. His hands were gone. Blood was oozing from his nose and mouth. He was dead and he couldn't have been any more dead if he had been blown to bits.

It was like no time at all before the bomb squad was there. They were the first to say letter bomb and naturally I had to answer all the questions about our letter-opening routine. They wanted to know too much. There were questions I just couldn't answer. All I could tell them was that there had been the three stamped, self-addressed envelopes that I'd left for him to open. They wanted to know where they'd come from. That was something I couldn't tell them. I'd never know just what tickets he or his wife might have written away for.

Nevertheless, I tried to be helpful.

"You can tell from his checkbook stubs," I said. "They'll show what he wrote away for and his wife'll know what tickets they received and what they don't have yet. You'll have to get that from Mrs. Dennis."

So then they were asking where he kept his checkbook and that was no good because he always kept it in his desk. There was nothing left of that for anyone to look at. They were down to what they could get from Mrs. Dennis and it wasn't right away that they could get anything from her. You tell a woman that her husband is dead, blown straight through into the next world by his morning mail. She's not going to come up with any quick, clear, and complete memory of just which shows her husband was planning on taking her to. She goes into shock first. Then she has to be sedated and allowed to rest. Even when she's begun to be herself again, it will still be some time before she can be expected to come up with any useful information.

Meanwhile the city was in an uproar. The culture and entertainment part of it was like hit with a plague. The newspapers were speculating. The TV public-interest shows were putting on debates. One faction would have it that Dennis had an enemy

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who, with diabolical cunning, had landed himself a job in the mail-order department of some place like the opera house or a ballet theater, places where Dennis was constantly writing in for tickets, constantly sending stamped, self-addressed envelopes. The fiend had waited and watched. When an order came in from Dennis, he had filled the stamped, self-addressed envelope but not with the two center and on the aisle but with the letter bomb. The man was protected against any possibility that the thing wouldn't go off and the bomb would be detected. There would be nothing about the envelope that could be traced to him. Everything would trace back to Dennis or to his wife.

The story, taken that way, caught the public interest, but it caused no panic. It was the rebuttal that set the cat among the pigeons. The counterargument was too persuasive and for a lot of people too frightening. At the opera and the ballet and the concert halls, not to speak of many of the theaters, mail-order ticket operations are tremendous. In none of the larger institutions could they be run as a one-person job. Each of these places has a sizable staff for handling mail orders and in seasons of heaviest demand they hire additional temporaries.

An enemy who was out to get Dennis would, first of all, have to know that those stamped, self-addressed envelopes were never opened in the routine way. He would have to know that they were opened by no one but Dennis himself. Then he would have to get a job in one of those mail-order departments. And that would only be the beginning.

He would have to wait and watch till a Dennis order fell into his hands and that could be a long wait with no certainty that one ever would. Even if one did at one time or another, he could have no way of predicting when that might be. He would need to be always prepared against the possibility. In other words, he would need the letter bomb always on him, ready to slip it into the Dennis envelope if and when it came his way.

A man would have to be mad to venture on so unpromising an approach to murder. He would need every kind of luck if he was to bring it off. There was a far more plausible theory: a madman had worked his way into one of those mail-order departments. For him there would be no difficulties since he would not be watching and waiting for a specific chosen victim. He would be stuffing his lethal weapon into any envelope at random. One could imagine a maniac with a grudge against, let's say, the affluent.

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It was a general disaster. All over town mail-order ticket business dropped away to almost nothing. Box-office lines grew so long and so wild that the police had to detach special squads of officers to control them. It wasn't only that the hordes of people who would ordinarily have written in for tickets were now coming down to the box offices to purchase them in person, it was also the hordes of people who had ordered by mail and who were now terrified of what the mail had brought them. They were on those lines with their unopened envelopes, demanding replacements for the tickets that reposed in the still sealed, stamped, self-addressed envelopes. There were even those who turned up on the ticket lines carrying a bucket of water in which they had the suspect envelope immersed.

As soon, however, as Mrs. Dennis recovered sufficiently to subject herself to police questioning, the thing began to narrow down. She had a record of tickets ordered and tickets received. The dates for which anything had been ordered she marked on her calendar. *Those dates were tentatively closed to any other engagements.* When tickets arrived in the mail, further marks on her calendar made the closings definite.

She was, therefore, able to identify for the detectives six box offices to which ticket orders had been sent and from which tickets had not yet been received. They were the opera house, a ballet theater, the symphony hall, a recital hall, and two Broadway theaters. The police went to work on her list. Two of the six bank checks had cleared. They had been drawn to the recital hall and one of the Broadway theaters.

The police moved on to the box offices. The opera house, the ballet theater, and the symphony hall all came up with the ticket orders, the checks, and the stamped, self-addressed envelopes. They had not yet mailed out the tickets for the performances Dennis had requested. A visit to the remaining Broadway theater resulted in what looked like pay dirt. That box office had no record of the order. Tickets for the date Mrs. Dennis had marked on her calendar had all been mailed out. The mailing time was consistent with a delivery time that would have brought them to Mr. Dennis' desk on that fatal morning. They didn't have the payment check. The check hadn't cleared the bank, and they had no record of the sale.

They told the police that if there had been a sale they would have a record. They offered a full explanation of their system.

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When mail-order tickets went out, the tickets went into the mail in stamped, self-addressed envelopes. The checks were deposited. The ticket requests were marked with the seat numbers and the performance dates and the requests were filed and held in the file until after the dates of the performances.

In the event of tickets being lost in the mail, the box office could check the file and know the numbers and date of the lost tickets. They could be replaced and anyone trying to use the lost tickets could be challenged.

That brought the cops back to me. I had told them that there had been three envelopes for Mr. Dennis himself to open that morning. Two were accounted for. They would be the recital hall and the one Broadway theater that had put the check through to the bank. Was I certain there had been a third?

I was certain.

But the theater said they had no record of the order.

"What would you expect them to say?" I asked.

"What the guys said in the other two places, that they had the order and they mailed the tickets."

"For free? They mailed the tickets and just tore up the check and kept no record of seat numbers and date?"

The detective shrugged.

"If it was somebody there," he said, "he's pinpointed himself. He could have put the whole thing through in the usual way—check to the bank, order into the file, and tickets along with the bomb in the envelope he mailed out. That would've left it wide open with all three transactions looking the same. Why would he fix it so we'd be sure to look his way?"

For my money the answer was obvious. I was careful not to say so. Cops don't like it if you tell them they're dumb. I had to set him straight and I tried to do it tactfully.

"There are the things we know that he didn't know," I said. "He couldn't have known that there was anyone like me, somebody who sorted the mail and left those special envelopes unopened, somebody who'd have a count on the envelopes and live to remember the count. He also couldn't have known that Mrs. Dennis kept a record of all tickets ordered and all tickets received. By destroying the order and the check and putting no tickets in the envelope, he would have thought he was playing it the safest way—not that he was leading you to him but that he was giving you no clue for looking at him at all. He'd just be out there with

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all the other box offices that weren't involved."

Mrs. Dennis was present and listening. She thought she could play detective too. Everybody gets into the act. Guys look at TV and imagine they can be Kojak. Gals imagine themselves one of Charlie's Angels maybe, though I didn't understand how Mrs. Dennis could have been kidding herself that way. You'd just have to see the way she's built, or maybe the way she isn't built, if you know what I mean.

"But that's a theater we're always writing to for tickets," she said. "We've been doing it for years. It would have to be a new employee. Do they have anyone new?"

"It's a three-people operation over there," the detective told her. "The youngest of the three has been on the job for twenty years. For the other two it's been longer."

"Then they've filled our ticket orders many times. How could it be them?"

She persisted with the stupid questions, but who was to tell her they were stupid? After all she was the widow. Past her grief and her shock she was doing her best to cooperate with the police. You had to handle her tactfully and gently. The detective said nothing. For all I could tell, they might not even have recognized that it was a dopey question.

"Three people," I said. "On any ticket request it would be pure luck which one of them handled it. This could be the first time the one who was looking for it had it fall into his hands."

As soon as I'd said it, I knew that this time my answer was at least as stupid as the question. I knew it without even reading the looks the detectives turned on me. Some guy sits in the box-office job for a good hunk of his lifetime just waiting for a chance to murder George Dennis? He sits there all those years with a letter bomb always handy, waiting against that day when luck will turn in his direction? I switched ground and gave it another try.

"Like we been thinking," I said, "it's got to be a nut anyway—a loony killing at random. It doesn't have to be somebody new on the job. Most crazies, after all, aren't born that way. They're not flaked out all their lives. Plenty of them go along perfectly normal until one reason or another they hit a breaking point and they take the shotgun up to the tower and start spraying bullets around. Then everybody who knew him tells you the same thing. They just can't believe it. He was always such a quiet, gentle, nice boy."

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I was wishing we could have been doing this without Mrs. Dennis. I was going to have to tell them what I'd been holding back. I was realizing that I should have told them in the first place. Any decent person, of course, would understand why I'd held it back. There are things like loyalty and pity. There's wanting to spare a woman that big hurt she doesn't need to have. Losing her husband the way Mrs. Dennis lost hers is rough enough on a woman. Now to come out with what I had to tell them and to do it in her hearing was going to be just too brutal. Would you want to be the one to let her know that she'd lost her man before the letter bomb, that she'd lost him while he was still alive?

I tried to get one of the detectives off by himself, but she wouldn't have it that way. Right off she turned ugly. If anything was to be said, it was her right to hear it.

"I'm only trying to spare you, Mrs. Dennis."

"Spare me what?"

"Since you didn't know when maybe it could have made a difference—"

"Didn't know what?"

"Now that it can't make any difference—"

"Didn't know what?"

Nobody showed any inclination to take me outside. Everybody was just sitting tight, waiting. There was no help for it. I just had to blurt it out. I hoped she'd remember that I'd done my best to spare her.

"There were other envelopes that had to be left for him to open himself."

The detectives looked interested, but it was the widow who pounced.

"What envelopes? From whom?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Dennis. They were not my business."

"You had to know something. You'd have needed some way of recognizing them."

I had to say it. There was no way I could soften the blow.

"Heavy linen paper," I said. "Pink with a lavender edge along the envelope flap and the paper was perfumed. Even before I'd come on it in sorting the mail I'd know when there was going to be one of those letters. I'd smell it."

The detectives stepped into it.

"There was one that morning?"

"Every morning including that one."

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I suppose they didn't need to know all that, but I could see I was already in trouble for holding it back. I was not going to hold off on anything more and anyhow she had it coming. Hadn't she asked for it, even demanded it?

"Every morning including that one, but none since?"

All the questions were coming from the detectives now. Mrs. Dennis was just sitting there shaking her head. She wasn't going to believe it. She didn't want to believe it.

"No," I said. "They've stopped. That's why I decided I'd better tell you."

"And why didn't you say something before?"

"I thought it was nobody's business, not even yours. A man is having an affair. The woman writes to him every day. She's in love with him, right? She wouldn't be writing to him every day if she wasn't in love with him. If she's in love with him she wouldn't send him a letter bomb, would she?"

That was my answer but Mrs. Dennis had a different one.

"He didn't say anything before this because there wasn't any such letter. There were never any such letters. He just made them up. He's lying."

It was at least ungrateful when you consider that I'd tried my best to spare her. But I could understand and I wasn't going to hold it against the poor woman. You know how those things are. The wife is always the last to know or her pride demands that she pretend she doesn't know. More than that, she has to pretend it wasn't so.

Given this choice of answers, the detectives, of course, took mine. They've been around. They know all about a woman's feelings and a woman's hurt pride.

"Now you're thinking that maybe she did send the bomb after all?"

I shrugged.

"A letter every day and none since," I said. "I've begun to think that maybe I was wrong about it. Maybe he was trying to get rid of this dame. She was writing every day and maybe he wasn't answering. Like they say—hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."

Now Mrs. Dennis was snarling.

"He's as right about that as he is about the letters," she said. "That's a misquotation. The line goes: 'and Hell no fury like a woman's scorn.' "

The detectives couldn't have cared less. They weren't running a

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class in English Lit. They should be asking themselves why, in the face of the grief and shock of what she had just learned, she could have any thought of stopping to split hairs between "a woman scorned" and "a woman's scorn." After all, who would be more the woman scorned? The mistress he might have been in the process of dropping or the wife he'd undoubtedly been in the process of deceiving?

Now that I'd come around to looking at it that way, I was wishing I'd said nothing about the pink, perfumed letters. Who's to say whether the wife is really always the last one to know or merely the last one to let it be known that she knows? Those write-in orders for tickets were sometimes written by him and sometimes by her. Whose handwriting had been on the three envelopes? Nobody could expect me to remember that, but there could have been something there.

Suppose the one ticket order had never been mailed. Suppose it had been destroyed and the check destroyed and the mailing envelope destroyed. Suppose nothing had been left but that stamped, self-addressed return envelope and, after a suitable interval—at about the time when the tickets, if ordered, should have been going out—that envelope had been stuffed with the fatal insert and dropped into the mail.

It could have been, for a woman scorned, no more than the rat deserved. I was now wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. I'd been thinking the police would go off to look for the other woman and never find her. I hadn't thought how much tighter a fit it might be for the injured wife.

I was wishing I could have my words back, but the detectives began to fire questions at me. It looked as though they had missed it completely. They wanted to know what Dennis had done with those perfumed letters on the pink linen paper. Had he kept them? Did I know where he kept them?

I would have given anything if I could have been able to tell them that he did keep them and if I could have been able to show them where to find them. It was no good. I had to tell them that each day, immediately after reading the newly delivered letter, he dropped it along with its envelope into the big ashtray on his desk and set fire to it.

"I emptied the charred scraps out of the ashtray every day," I said. "Even when I'd be in the outer room I always knew when he was burning one of those letters. The heat intensified the smell of

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the perfume. It was like he was sitting at his desk burning incense."

There were many more questions.

Had I never looked at the return address on those pink envelopes?

Didn't I have any curiosity?

Hadn't I even inadvertently noticed a return address? After all I had handled those envelopes morning after morning. Was I blind?

Had there been any telephone calls?

No, there had only been the letters.

"If there *were* letters, they weren't what you are thinking."

That was Mrs. Dennis. There had been no other woman. She could guarantee that.

So the detectives went off on a search for the other woman even though Mrs. Dennis insisted there could be none, not for a man who came home to dinner every night and, except for the nights when he took his wife out, stayed home every night. Any man who has another woman goes off on business trips. Dennis never did. Any man who has another woman has nights when he's kept late at the office. Dennis never had such nights. Where had there been the time for him to fit in another woman?

The detectives were worldly men. They knew how those things go. They weren't believing a word she said. So now it was their baby. I'd told them everything I could. I had my own work to do. It was going to involve overtime and nobody was going to thank me for it. I wasn't even going to tell Mrs. Dennis I was doing it. With the attitude she was taking toward me ever since I'd brought up those pink letters, there was nothing I could do now that she would appreciate. But that was all right. A man does his job because it is his job and it's there to be done.

I was going to have to go back to the office in the evening. The auditors would be coming in any day now and I had to get things ready for them. Dennis was gone and Mrs. Dennis had turned against me, but that made no difference. I had my job and I had to do it.

It was nine o'clock when I went back to the office. Before I'd even opened the outer door, I knew there was something wrong. The lights were on inside. I could have thought it was the cleaning women in there, but I knew better. This wasn't the first time I'd come back at night to put in some overtime. The cleaning

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women started at the top of the building and worked down. They never hit our floor till after midnight.

I went in quietly. Flung over a chair in the outer room I saw her coat. There was no mistaking it. I knew that coat well. The door to the inner office stood slightly ajar. Through the narrow opening I couldn't see all of that inner room, but I could see just enough. I could see the office safe. Its door stood open and I could see what was out of it. The shelf that should have held the ledgers was empty. It was those ledgers I'd come to work on, the ledgers I had to fix before the auditors came and before anyone else looked at them.

I pulled out as quietly as I'd come.

Now I'm home and in my pajamas, ready for bed. There's only one thing left for me to do. I need only to take the pills, every last one in the bottle this time because that is exactly the right dose, neither too many nor too few. It's a pity I must do it, but there's no help for it. I can't expect anyone to understand that it was his fault. He should have trusted me either all the way or not at all. Trust a man only part way and you plant ideas in his head.

There are quicker ways, but they are less comfortable and I have time for the pills. Even if she's already figured out that the return envelope wasn't necessarily mailed from the box office, it will take her time to find the motive. She'll find it. She's looking in the right place, but she's going to be hours with the ledgers before she can get it pinned down. The pills will be all right. They'll have taken care of everything before they'll come for me. They can be trusted.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

It is always a pleasure and a thrill to visit old Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the retired general practitioner, and listen to one of his "impossible crimes" of the past. And this one is truly a "miracle problem," a kind of "locked room" in reverse. Start with a 70-year-old haunted house that whispers. That alone is enough to stir the juices and pump the adrenalin. Now add a secret room from which no one who has ever entered has ever come out. Can you resist that premise? No? Then join old Doc Sam and Thaddeus Sloan the ghost-hunter—and enter that secret room with them! Will they come out? Will you *come out? Will . . .*

THE PROBLEM OF THE WHISPERING HOUSE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"This time I promised you a story about a real haunted house," old Dr. Sam Hawthorne began, pouring the drinks as he always did. "And that's what I'm going to give you! It happened in February of 1928, and it came darned close to being the last case—either medical or mysterious—that I ever handled. But first I better tell you about the ghost-hunter, because the story really started the day he arrived in Northmont . . ."

The ghost-hunter's name was Thaddeus Sloan (Dr. Sam continued), and with a name like that I suppose I expected to meet a gray-bearded old professor with thick spectacles and a cane. Instead, he proved to be a man in his mid-thirties, not much older than myself, who immediately said, "Call me Thad."

"Then I'm Sam," I said, shaking his hand. He was taller than me, and thin to the point of being gaunt. A tiny beard—almost a

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goatee—helped to hide a weak chin, and it combined with his deep-set, intense eyes to suggest a sort of benevolent Satan.

"I suppose you know why I'm here in Northmont, Sam."

I scratched my head and smiled. "Well, I can't rightly say. We have our neighborhood haunts, certainly. Some years back there was talk that the bandstand in the town square was haunted, but it turned out to be a human spook. And then there's the—"

"I'm interested in the Bryer house."

"Oh, yes. I should have guessed." A Boston newspaper had recently run a Sunday feature on the old place, telling more than most of Northmont's residents had ever known.

"Is it true that the house whispers? And that it contains a secret room which no one has ever come out of, once they've entered it?"

"To tell you the truth I've never been inside the Bryer place. It's been empty for as long as I've lived in Northmont, and I only go where there are patients who need me."

"But surely you've heard the legends!"

"It was just an old empty house to me till I read that feature in the Boston paper. Maybe that reporter used his imagination a bit." He seemed so dejected by my words that I had to add, "I've heard people say it was haunted, though. And sometimes the wind made sounds as if the house was whispering."

That seemed to cheer him up. "I spoke to the reporter about his story, of course. He said he obtained most of his information from former Northmont residents now living in the Boston area."

"That's quite possible."

"Someone mentioned your name as one who has made something of a hobby out of solving local mysteries."

"I wouldn't say that," I demurred. "Things happen here the way they do in any town. Sometimes I help out Sheriff Lens, and if I'm lucky I spot a piece of evidence the others have missed."

"Nevertheless, you're the only one who can help me. I need someone who knows the area to act as a guide. I intend to spend a night in the old Bryer house, and I'd like you to join me."

"Ghost-hunting is a little out of my line," I said. "Ghosts don't need doctors."

At that moment my nurse April entered with the morning mail. She smiled uncertainly at Thad Sloan and said, "Dr. Sam, there's a telephone call from Mrs. Andrews. Her son Billy fell out of the hayloft and hurt his leg."

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"Tell her I'll be right out." I smiled at my visitor. "Come with me if you'd like. You'll see how a country doctor practices. And Mrs. Andrews lives just down the road from the Bryer place."

He followed me out and climbed into my yellow Pierce-Arrow Runabout. "This is quite a car for a country doctor."

"A graduation gift from my family, seven years ago. It's getting a bit old now, but it still runs well."

I took the North Road, which got us to the Andrews place first. Mrs. Andrews hurried out to meet me, plainly distraught. "Dr. Sam, I'm so glad you came! Billy landed on a pitchfork! He's bleedin' pretty bad."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Andrews. Just take me to him."

She led the way across the barnyard where vestiges of our February snow still lingered in spots. I could understand the reason for her concern. Her husband, a former carnival pitchman, had died of a heart attack the previous year. The job of running the farm and tending the livestock had fallen on 23-year-old Billy. A serious injury to the only able-bodied man on the place could be fatal to the future of the farm.

I found Billy lying on the barn floor, a crude tourniquet tightened around his left leg. His bloodied coveralls had been torn away from the wound, a messy thing where the prong of the pitchfork had gone clear through the fleshy part of his calf. "That's not so bad," I said reassuringly, after a moment's inspection. "The bleeding helped cleanse the wounds."

Billy Andrews gritted his teeth. "I was forkin' hay down for the cows when I lost my footing and fell. Damned fork went clear through me."

"Could have been a lot worse." Then I remembered Thad Sloan standing by the barn door and introduced him to Billy and Mrs. Andrews. He nodded a greeting but kept his eyes on me, apparently fascinated by my doctoring.

"Now I'm going to give you a little pain-killer," I told Billy. "Then I'll stitch up these holes in your leg." I cleansed the wounds with antiseptic and set to work. There was no point moving him to the house till I had him patched up, and he seemed comfortable enough where he was.

To make conversation while I worked, I said, "Mr. Sloan is a ghost-hunter. He's here to see the old Bryer house."

"Oh, there's no ghost in there!" Mrs. Andrews said with a flutter of her hand. "Them's just stor

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Thad Sloan was staring off across the fields at a house about a half mile away. "Is that the place?" he asked.

"That's it," I confirmed. "I'll get you there soon enough, when I finish with Billy here."

The ghost-hunter turned to Mrs. Andrews once again. "You mean you've never noticed anything strange there? No odd lights at night, or unexplained noises? It's said the house can be heard to whisper."

"Not by me, it can't. Billy used to play around there when he was a boy. Billy, you ever hear the Bryer house whisperin' to you?"

He shifted a bit on the barn floor as I completed my mending job. "Never heard a sound 'cept once when I found some hobos camped there. An' they did more than whisper. They chased me clear across the fields."

"Come on now," I said, helping him to his feet. "Just keep the weight off that leg and you'll be okay. We'll get you up to the house." I walked on his left side, keeping my arm around him as he hobbled along. Up at the house we got him into bed and I told him to stay put. "It'll be painful to walk on for a few days, but there's no serious damage. You'll be back in shape in no time."

Mrs. Andrews saw us to the door. "I can't thank you enough for comin' right out, Dr. Sam."

"That's what I'm here for."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Don't you worry. April will send a bill, and you pay me when you're able."

Back in the car, driving down the bumpy dirt road to the Bryer place, Thad Sloan said, "I thought country doctors like you only existed in books."

"There are a few of us left."

The driveway to the Bryer house, overgrown with weeds in summer, was rutted and muddy from the current thaw. One look at it decided me to leave the car on the road and walk up to the house. From the outside, even close up, it appeared in remarkably good shape for its seventy years. The shuttered windows seemed undisturbed, and though the gray paint was faded, there were no signs of peeling.

"I don't suppose we can get in," I said.

He smiled at me. "We can if the lock's working. I got a key from the real-estate man in Boston who has the property listed."

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"Then you're serious about spending the night here?"

"Certainly."

Until that moment I hadn't really believed him. "If the place is for sale, does that mean the last of the Bryer family is dead?"

"There are some cousins, but they want to get rid of it." He inserted the key in the lock and opened the door with ease. I followed him into the darkened house.

"I'd suggest opening some shutters to let the daylight in. There's never been electricity here."

Thad Sloan produced a flashlight from his pocket. "I'd rather use this. You can see there's a good supply of candles here and that should do us. Sunlight isn't conducive to conjuring up ghosts."

Most of the furniture had been removed from the house long ago, and I was surprised to see the few pieces remaining. There was a shabby, moth-eaten armchair in the living room, and an empty cabinet standing next to the big old fireplace. There were two straight chairs in what might have been the dining room. In one corner of the kitchen we found a burned-down candle stub and an empty bottle which could have contained bootleg whiskey. "I guess Billy Andrews was right about the hobos," I remarked.

"No recent signs, though. This might have been here for years."

We moved on, through the other first-floor rooms, noting occasional pieces of furniture that hadn't been worth carting away. We went up the creaking stairs to the second floor, guided by Sloan's pocket torch and the sunlight that came from some unshuttered upper windows.

"Nothing here," I said at last. "Satisfied there are no ghosts?"

"Spirits hardly sit around welcoming noontime visitors. It's in the night that we'll find them, if there are any."

"I don't hear any whispering, either. And what about that room you mentioned, where no one ever comes out of, once they've entered it?"

Thaddeus Sloan sighed. "I don't know. We'll have to come back tonight."

I still wonder why I ever agreed to spend the night with a ghost-hunter in a supposedly haunted house. Now I can only blame it on the folly of youth, though at the time it didn't seem that wild an idea. I suppose I wanted to prove something to Thad Sloan, and maybe to myself. Northmont was my town, if only by

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adoption, and if there was a ghost to be revealed, I wanted to take part in the exorcising of it.

And so that night, shortly before ten, we drove back out to the Bryer place. Sloan had a good supply of candles and matches, along with some other equipment that puzzled me. "You see," he explained, "there are certain procedures which must be followed. Some ghost-hunters seal the doors and windows with seven human hairs, and wear a necklace of garlic. I don't go quite that far, but I do bring along a revolver—"

"For a ghost?"

He smiled at me. "Just a precaution."

We were in the largest of the downstairs rooms, and Thad Sloan stepped to the center of it with a piece of chalk in his hand. Without saying a word he drew a large circle on the wooden floor, and within it traced a five-pointed star. "A pentacle, you see. One is said to be safe inside it."

"A revolver and a pentacle!" I marveled. "You *are* ready for anything."

He had other equipment too—a camera and flashgun that he mounted on a tripod with a revolving head. "If any ghost comes here tonight, we'll be prepared."

I settled down for a long boring night, wishing I'd brought along the latest medical journal to catch up on.

It was about an hour later, not long before midnight, when we heard the whispering. At first I took it to be the wind stirring through the upper reaches of the old house, but soon it seemed to take on the sound and substance of speech.

"Be gone from here if you value your lives . . ."

"Did you hear it?" Sloan exclaimed.

"I think so. I can't be too sure."

"Be gone from here . . ," the voice whispered again.

"It's some sort of trickery," I decided at once. "Somebody's trying to fool us."

"Come on, Sam. Let's have a look." He picked up the revolver and stepped outside the carefully drawn pentacle. I followed, a bit reluctantly for all my bravado.

"What do you think?" I asked. "Upstairs?"

"Let's see."

We went quickly up the front stairs and paused at the top to listen once more. Now there did seem to be a wind blowing outside, but we heard no sound of whispering.

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Then suddenly the downstairs door opened. We froze in our tracks and Sloan signaled for me to hide. I stepped into one of the open bedrooms.

Someone was coming up the stairs. I saw the glow of a lantern and then I saw a man. A thin bearded man, not too tall, wearing a shabby winter coat and a fur hat. He moved quickly but carefully, holding the lantern high to light his way. Though he seemed familiar with the house, I was certain I'd never seen him before.

And yet, as the figure passed me, not five feet away, there could have been something familiar about it after all.

I expected Sloan to come out of hiding at any moment, but perhaps like me he was more interested in seeing where this man was going. We found out soon enough. He walked to the end of the hall, where a blank wall faced him, and touched a spot in the frame of an adjoining doorway. Immediately there was a click, and when he pushed the wall it swung open before him. It was the first time I'd ever seen a real secret panel in operation.

The hidden door closed behind him and the upper hallway was once more plunged into darkness. I waited a moment and then stepped back into the hall. Thad Sloan saw me and came out of his hiding place. "What do you think?" I asked.

"I think we've found our secret room," Sloan replied softly.

"The room no one ever comes out of?"

"We'll know soon enough. He went in, and he hasn't come out yet."

We waited for what seemed an eternity, though in truth it was no more than a half hour. At any moment we were prepared to leap back into our hiding places should the secret panel open, but it remained closed.

Finally, when the time was after midnight, Sloan said, "I'm going downstairs for my camera. Then let's open the damned thing and confront him."

"There's always the possibility of another exit," I pointed out.

"But where would it lead to? If he'd come out elsewhere on this floor we'd have seen him." He went down for his camera and tripod and returned in a few moments carrying them on his shoulder. "Do you remember what he pushed to open it?"

I'd been feeling around the door jamb and found a loose piece of molding. "I think this is it."

Sloan positioned the tripod and camera so that it pointed at the

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wall. He filled the flashgun with extra powder and gripped the shutter release. "All right," he said. "Open it."

I pressed the molding. The door in the wall gave a click and swung open. I wondered if we would find a startled man or an empty room.

We found neither.

The man was still there, seated upright by a table facing us. But our sudden appearance did nothing to startle him. "I think he's—" I began, stepping into the room and going to him.

"Dead?" Thad Sloan completed. He tripped the shutter of his camera and the small secret room was filled with an instant's glare from the flash powder. It was enough to show us there was no other occupant and no other exit.

"He's been stabbed," I said, pulling back the coat to reveal a hunting knife plunged deep into his left side, toward the heart. "And here's something." I pointed toward the floor, where a small .22 caliber automatic had apparently slipped from the dead man's fingers.

Sloan glanced around at the solid walls. He even looked behind the open door of the secret room. "But there's no hiding place, and no way out of here!"

"Exactly."

"You're saying, Sam, that he was killed by a ghost?"

I straightened up from my examination of the body. "No, what I'm saying is even more fantastic than that. I know quite a bit about rigor mortis and such things. This body is already cold and stiff. He didn't die within the last half hour. He's been dead for probably fifteen to twenty hours."

"But that's impossible! We just saw—"

I nodded. "It wasn't a ghost that killed him, but it certainly seems to have been a ghost that walked into this room tonight."

I stayed with the body while Thad Sloan ran down the road to use the phone at the Andrews house. He called Sheriff Lens as I instructed him, and most of the rest of the night was given over to the police investigation. We learned nothing new from it, except that a great many people entered the secret room during those hours and left it again without anything happening to them.

Sheriff Lens was fascinated with the workings of the secret door. "This place was built in the late 1850s," he said. "They say

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it might have been a station on the underground railway into Canada—for escaped slaves, you know."

"I suppose that's a possibility," I agreed. We'd been tapping at the walls and floor without finding a thing. I'd even allowed myself to be closed into the room alone while Thad Sloan and Sheriff Lens waited outside. I discovered to my horror that there seemed to be no way of opening the secret door from the inside.

"There you have it," Sloan said, obviously excited by the results of his ghost-hunting. "The room of no return! The room from which no one ever emerges! That's what it means—a secret cell in which someone could starve to death without ever being found."

"I'll admit these walls are thick," I said. "You could be right."

Sheriff Lens was examining the tiny automatic. "This gun has been fired. Looks like he took a shot at his killer."

I remembered a hole I'd noticed in the wooden table leg. "And I'll bet here's where it went. Do you have a pocketknife, Sheriff?" In a few moments I'd extracted the slug from the slender leg of the table. It was mashed a bit, but clearly identifiable as a bullet.

"What does that tell us?" Sloan asked.

"Nothing except that the dead man was a poor shot."

"The bullet would have passed through a ghost."

"Ghosts don't use huntin' knives," Sheriff Lens said. "I never believed in ghosts myself and I ain't about to start now."

"What about the thing we saw?" Thad Sloan asked. "It had to be a ghost!"

Sheriff Lens snorted. "That's your problem, not mine."

"Any idea who the dead man is?" I asked the sheriff.

"Never saw him before, and his pockets are empty. No cash, no identification, nothing."

We could do little more that night, but in the morning I was barely awake when Sheriff Lens was knocking at my door, bringing me some interesting news. "The coroner backs you up, Doc. Says he died sometime between three and nine yesterday morning. But there's somethin' else too. The dead man's beard is false."

"What?"

"A fake beard, glued on his face with spirit gum like actors use. What do you make of that?"

"I feel stupid for not realizing it. Did anyone recognize him with the beard off?"

"He looked a little familiar, Doc. I wouldn't want to swear to it, but I might have seen him hangin' around town."

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"Funny—when he passed me in that hall I thought he seemed familiar too."

"You still onto that ghost story of yours?"

"I'm only telling you what we saw."

"How about telling me instead how you could see a dead man walkin'."

I thought about it. "That may not be the real problem, Sheriff."

"It's another one of them impossible crimes you like so much, ain't it?"

"Seems so," I admitted. "It certainly looks impossible."

"What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Go back to that house by daylight and start all over again."

I went alone, parking on the road as I'd done before, and made my way up the driveway to the house. The man last night, whoever he was, had apparently come without a car—or else someone had driven it away. I wasn't even considering the possibility of a ghost. The man I'd seen was flesh and blood, very much alive, and if that only deepened the mystery it was something I'd have to figure out.

I went around to the back of the house, walking over long grass still flattened by the weight of the recently melted snow. I didn't really know what I expected to find, but I had to look anyway. It was the drainpipe at the rear of the house that finally caught my attention. The spout at its bottom curved out about two feet above the ground, and there was something about it that reminded me of the mouthpiece for a particularly large trumpet. I cupped my hands around it and tried calling through it. My voice reverberated in the distance, but I couldn't tell if it was coming from inside the house.

"Back to the scene of the crime?" a voice behind me asked. I straightened up with a start and saw that it was Thaddeus Sloan, the ghost-hunter.

"Look, I think I've found something. Do you still have the key to the front door?"

"Yes." He produced it from his pocket.

"Go inside the house and stand about where we were standing last night when we heard the whispering. I want to try an experiment."

He followed my instructions, and I discovered I could see him moving about through the window above the drain spout. I tried calling again and he signaled that he heard. Then I lowered my

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voice to a harsh whisper. He hurried over and opened the window. "That's it, Sam! That's the whispering house! How did you know?"

"Just a guess. Our ghost last night entered the house right after we heard the whispering. That made me think there was some way of causing it from outside. I saw the drainpipe and tried it."

"Then you're saying our ghost is not a ghost?"

"I'm saying it's someone who knows that sounds from this drainpipe are somehow amplified in the attic and fed through the whole house, probably by way of the chimneys."

"How could that man have whispered into the drainpipe, opened the door, walked upstairs, and gone into the secret room if he'd been stabbed to death almost a full day earlier?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "There is one explanation, but at this point it raises more questions than it answers. It merely substitutes one impossibility for another."

"What's that?"

"Well, if the man we saw was the murderer, disguised as his victim, that would explain a lot."

"It wouldn't explain how he got out of that secret room."

"No, it wouldn't," I agreed glumly.

"I like the idea of a ghost much better. I only wish I'd gotten a picture of him walking."

"Did you develop the photograph of the room and the body?"

He nodded, reaching into a leather case he carried. "Here it is, but it doesn't help."

A photograph of the scene had once helped me solve a mystery, but this time I had to admit it showed me very little. The body at the table, the solid wall behind—that was all. We were still confronted with a nameless ghost. "I'm going back to the office," I said, handing the picture to Sloan. "You coming?"

He shook his head. "I want to look around some more."

I walked out to the road and climbed into my Runabout. I was just pulling away when something happened. There was a sputtering at first from under the hood, then a sheet of flame shot up, and suddenly the whole car was on fire.

Somehow I managed to jump free and roll around on the cold earth to smother the few flames that had clung to my clothing. But the car was a total loss. I stood and watched it burn as I might keep a vigil at the bedside of a dying patient. There was

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nothing I could do to save it.

Attracted by the smoke, Thad Sloan finally appeared from behind the Bryer house. He ran toward me. "What happened? Your car—"

"I don't know. There was something like an explosion, I think. I was lucky to get out."

"I'll drive you back to town."

"No, I think I want Sheriff Lens to look at this." I started down the road to the Andrews house. "I'm going to call him."

Mrs. Andrews greeted me at the door. "More trouble, Dr. Sam? Your clothes are all burnt."

"Car caught fire. I want to phone the sheriff, if I may."

"Go right ahead."

"How's Billy's leg coming along?"

"Slowly. I wish you'd have a look at it while you're here."

He was up in his room, trying to limp around as best he could. I saw at once that my stitches were a bit inflamed, but that didn't bother me. "You should be in bed," I told him sternly. "One day is too soon to be up on that leg."

"I feel so helpless when there's chores to be done. Momma can't do everything."

"Just get back in bed and let me put some salve on those stitches. Otherwise I'll send you to the hospital where you belong."

That seemed to scare him and he got back on the bed. "You don't look much better'n me, Doc. What happened?"

"Car burned up."

"Not your Runabout!"

"Yes. Needed a new one anyway, after seven years. Hated to see it go like that, though."

I finished up there and walked back to the car with Mrs. Andrews. The flames had died down and I saw that Sheriff Lens had arrived in answer to my call. He had a couple of our volunteer firemen with him and they extinguished the rest of the fire. "It sure is a shame," Mrs. Andrews said, looking at it.

"That was meant to cook your hide, Doc," Sheriff Lens said. "Somebody hid a can of gasoline under the hood, with a rag wick leadin' to the spark plugs. It was like a crude bomb."

"I suspected something like that."

"What do you think it means, Sam?" Thad Sloan asked. "You got any enemies around here?"

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"The only enemy I've got is the person who killed our unknown man yesterday. And I guess this rules out a ghost, 'cause ghosts don't go around planting bombs in automobiles."

"The bomb had to be planted while we were out behind the house," Sloan said. "That means the killer must have been watching us."

"Maybe," I said, remembering that I'd been there first, before he arrived.

Sheriff Lens looked sadly at the smoking ruin and shook his head. "It was one beauty of a car, Doc."

"April will be heartbroken. Worse than me." The car had always been a special joy to my nurse.

Sheriff Lens led me aside. "I do have one bit o' news for you, Doc. I got a call this mornin' from the State Police. They managed to identify the dead man."

"Who was he?"

"Fellow named George Gifford. He was involved in some frauds during the Florida land boom a few years back. A grand jury indicted him, but the trial was still pending and he was free on bail. The state cops tell me Gifford was a real land promoter, always sellin' non-existent oil wells or gold mines to somebody."

"Interesting. I wonder what brought him to the Bryer place."

"Maybe he saw that newspaper article and decided to buy a real haunted house."

"Or to sell one," I said. The news had started me thinking, and on the way back to the office I asked Sloan for the name of the Boston newsman who'd written the story about Northmont's haunted house.

The news about the car had already reached April. "Oh, Dr. Sam!" she cried as I entered the office. "Are you all right?"

"I'm in better shape than the car, April. Any calls?"

"Nothing urgent."

"Good. I want to phone long distance to Boston."

The reporter's name was Chuck Yeager and I could barely hear him on the poor connection. Yes, he remembered the story about the haunted house, and he remembered Thaddeus Sloan asking him about it. "Sloan came after the article appeared?" I shouted into the mouthpiece. "You didn't see him before?"

"No, no—I never knew Mr. Sloan."

"Who was the former Northmont resident that told you about the house?"

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"Well, it was a man named Gifford. He's in real estate."

"And under indictment for land fraud."

"I don't know about that," the reporter said, taken aback. "But I checked out what he told me. The house used to be a stopping place for runaway slaves, and there was a legend connected with a hidden room from which no one ever came out. You know that article caused me lots of grief."

"How's that?"

"The family was trying to sell it, and they claimed my story spoiled the deal. Some people don't like ghosts and other people don't like publicity. They especially don't want a house that's the object of curiosity. That's why the owners had to hire Sloan."

"Sloan works for the owners? Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure! They hired him to chase away the ghost or something. He promised to let me know what happened and give me an exclusive on the story. *Has* anything happened?"

"Nothing much," I assured him. "You'll hear about it when it does."

I hung up and decided I had things to do. But first of all I had to get out of my scorched clothing.

Late that afternoon I called Sloan at his hotel and told him I was going back to the Bryer house. "It's time I confronted the ghost," I said. "Want to come along?"

"Of course!"

"Then pick me up, will you? I haven't had time to replace my car."

It was already dark by the time we reached the house, and the weather had turned cold again, bringing a few snow flurries to the brisk February air. I waited while Sloan unlocked the door. "Does Sheriff Lens know you've got that key?" I asked.

"I mentioned it to him, but he didn't ask me for it."

"He should have."

"Then how would we get in?"

That set me thinking about something else, and I didn't answer him right away. Instead I followed him inside and up the stairs to the hidden room. "There has to be a way out of here," I said. "Those legends about the runaway slaves and the room no one ever comes out of must have a basis in fact. No one comes out because there's another exit, and I'm going to find it."

"How?"

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I pressed the door jamb and then pushed in the unlocked panel. "I'm going in here and shut the door. Give me a half hour and then open it."

"Can't I come with you?"

"Then who would let me out if I don't find the other exit?"

He agreed with that and I entered the secret room alone. The panel swung shut behind me and I heard the lock click. I was alone in a room without an exit.

The lantern I'd brought along was set on the table, and I went to work on the walls first. They were all solid, but the back wall seemed more solid than the rest. I wondered why, and then I remembered that the fireplace would be somewhere below me. This solid stone wall would be the side of the chimney running up through the center of the house. It was the perfect place for a secret passage, but no amount of tapping yielded a clue. I tried the other walls next with the same result. And the wooden floor was just as solid.

But I'd been over all this before with Sheriff Lens. The one place we hadn't touched was the ceiling. It looked solid, and I climbed up on the table to make sure. It was solid. Even where the paint had chipped away here and there, I found no clue.

I climbed down off the table. It was a dead end.

I sat down on the chair, as the late George Gifford had done, and thought about it. Four walls, no windows, a solid floor and a solid ceiling. There was not even any ventilation when the door was closed. Had they all died like Gifford, here in this room? Was that why it was a room of no return? I could almost imagine the runaway slaves imprisoned here, dying of suffocation or starvation, whichever claimed them first.

No. No, no, no.

I had proved to myself that the killer left this room while it was locked. I couldn't be wrong about that. There was something I wasn't seeing—a door I wasn't finding.

My pocket watch showed that the half hour was up. I pounded on the locked panel to signal Thad Sloan for my release.

Nothing happened.

I pounded again, louder this time. Still nothing.

Thad Sloan. Had I misjudged him completely? Had I delivered myself into the hands of the murderer himself? I remembered him running down to the burning car, remembered that he was working for the owners of the house, remembered that he'd gone

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downstairs for his camera after the ghost entered this room.

The camera!

I'd been momentarily blinded by the flash when he took that picture. Could someone have sneaked past me, out of the room, in that instant?

I pounded louder, but nobody came.

It was a moment when all my certainties were called into question. If I'd been wrong, I'd put myself in the hands of a killer who'd already tried to burn me to death.

But I wasn't wrong. No one could have passed unseen in the instant that flash went off. Sloan and I were blocking the doorway. And some trace of him would have shown in the photograph itself.

But if Sloan wasn't in league with the killer, what had happened to him?

I stared at the blank solid walls, looking for the way out that didn't exist, growing more frightened by the minute.

And then I thought of something.

I'd been in here for close to 45 minutes, yet the air still seemed fresh and the lantern burned brightly.

The room was not as tightly sealed as it seemed.

I removed the glass chimney from the lantern and the flame immediately began to flicker. It took me only an instant to locate the source of the draft. Air was coming up from between the wooden floorboards.

Yet there was no way of lifting them, no trap door or panel. The floorboards extended beneath the solid wall on the chimney side.

And that stopped me.

How could the floor run *beneath* the wall, into what I was certain was the chimney itself?

I bent to examine the floor once more and noticed some gouges that could have been caused by the point of a knife. A few looked recent, but many seemed quite old. I took a penknife from my pocket and jabbed it into the floorboard that seemed to have the most gouges. Using it as a lever, I tried sliding the single board toward the chimney wall.

It moved. I tried a second and then a third. They all moved.

Each of the gouged floorboards slid away into the chimney wall, and I could only imagine them extending out into the chimney itself. When I'd moved four of the four-inch boards, there was a space in the floor wide enough for me to squeeze through. I dropped down, taking the lantern with me, and found myself in a

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crawl space above the first-floor ceiling. It was little more than a foot high, and difficult to negotiate, but I managed. Above me, I found that the wooden floorboards could be slid shut as easily as they'd been slid open.

I knew now there must be a way out of here, and I kept crawling—on my stomach—until I found it. Along the outside wall I came at last to an opening with a ladder running down to the first floor. I climbed down and found myself in a small pantry at the back of the house. This was the escape route the runaway slaves had used to avoid being trapped in the upstairs room. This was the exit from the room of no return.

I hurried through the house to the front stairs and went back up. Thad Sloan was sprawled on his back in the hallway, alive but unconscious. He'd been hit on the back of the head.

I straightened up and looked around, trying to see into the dark doorways of the other rooms. "You can come out now, Mrs. Andrews," I said. "I know you're in there."

She stepped into the circle of light from my lantern, holding a shotgun pointed at my chest. "You know too much, Dr. Sam. I'm sorry that I'll have to kill you."

The light danced off her face as she spoke, and I felt a chill of fear run down my spine. This was the real evil of the Bryer house, more dangerous than any ghost. "You've finally come out in the open, Mrs. Andrews."

She raised the shotgun an inch. "I didn't think you'd ever find the way out of that room, but I waited to be sure."

"You rigged that gasoline bomb in my car, didn't you?"

"Yes. I was afraid of your reputation for solving mysteries."

"My reputation almost went down to defeat tonight. It was only luck that I found the exit from that room—luck, and my certainty that there had to be an exit."

"How did you know?"

"Gifford's body had no identification. The pockets were all empty. But if the pockets were empty, what happened to the key he needed to enter the house? We saw him come in, pass us, and go into the secret room. Of course Gifford's body was already in that room, and it was you who passed us, wearing the hat and coat and false beard.

"But the absence of the key only added to the evidence of rigor mortis to convince me it was someone else who walked by us. You

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needed the beard and hat and coat, probably left over from your husband's carnival days, to disguise your own identity—and then you put them on the dead man to heighten the illusion that it was he who walked by us in the hall. Then you escaped through the floor-boards as I just did."

"George Gifford deserved to die," she said quietly.

"Why? I haven't quite figured out your motive."

"He came here months ago with some sort of land scheme. He wanted to buy this place and our farm too, and sell shares in a vacation resort of some kind. I made the mistake of telling him about the legends and the secret room, and he got a Boston reporter to write it up so's the value of the land would fall. When the Bryer family sent this ghost-hunter fella, Gifford hurried out here and started threatening us. We were dreadfully afraid he would take away the farm Billy and I worked so hard at!"

There was no need telling her that Gifford was more interested in bilking investors than in taking away her farm. It was the fear of losing the farm that had caused George Gifford's death. "I can understand that," I said gently. "But there's something else."

"What's that?" Her face was knotted with suspicion.

"Why did you take such a risk coming here last night in your false beard and coat? Why was it important that we see the dead man alive? We might never have found the body. You led us to it, at great risk to yourself. We might have grabbed you or burst into the secret room before you could escape."

She was confused now. "I—I don't—"

I shook my head sadly. "Out here in the country you don't get to know about things like rigor mortis, do you? You didn't know the police could tell the approximate time of death. You used Gifford's key, taken from his body, to come here in disguise after whispering into the drainpipe. Then you transferred the disguise to the dead man so we'd think he wasn't killed till last night. Tell me now, isn't that true?"

"You think too much, Dr. Sam." She raised the shotgun and I stared down the double barrels, knowing only that I had to keep on talking, keep on making her talk.

"You won't shoot me, Mrs. Andrews. You could plant the fire bomb because that was impersonal. You didn't have to see me die. But you won't shoot me because you haven't killed anyone yet and you're not going to start now. It was your son Billy who killed Gifford, wasn't it?"

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The sound that came from her throat was all the answer I needed. "Whispering up a drainpipe to scare people," I hurried on. "Not the sort of thing a mother does, unless her son's told her how to do it. Her son who played here and stumbled on the secret room in his childhood. And found the way out too. It was Billy all the time, wasn't it?

"You didn't stab that man to death with a hunting knife—Billy did! And when Gifford pulled a tiny pistol during the struggle and shot Billy in the leg, it was your idea to pass the wound off as a barn accident. The small bullet, no bigger than a pitchfork's tine, made a clean wound through his leg and then lodged in the table leg. The fact that it didn't even have the power to go through that table leg hinted that it had gone through something else first.

"Of course Gifford's bleeding covered up the blood from Billy's leg, and I suppose Billy wrapped something around his wound till he managed to hobble home. He had too bad a limp to impersonate the dead man last night, so you did it for him. If we believed Gifford wasn't killed till last night, it gave your son a perfect alibi—in case Sloan and I found Gifford's body and Billy needed an alibi."

"My God, Billy stabbed him in self-defense! The man had a gun! Billy only stole the things from his pockets to delay identification."

"Then don't make it any worse for Billy than it already is, Mrs. Andrews. Let the jury decide. Sheriff Lens is at your house right now, arresting him."

It wasn't true but she didn't know that. The shotgun wavered for just an instant, and I took it away from her.

"Terrible case," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, finishing his drink. "I almost lost my life twice over, and I did lose my car! That ghost-hunter fella Thad Sloan got a bump on the head and went back to Boston without his spook. The jury gave Billy the benefit of the doubt and only found him guilty of manslaughter, but the trial was too much for his mother and she died before it was over. And—oh, yes—April went with me the following week to pick out a new car."

He held up the bottle to the light. "Got time for one more small—ah—libation? No? Well, come again soon. Next time I'll tell you about when I went to a medical convention in Boston and found out that impossible crimes can happen in the big city too!"

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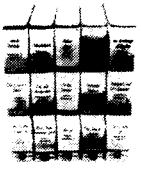

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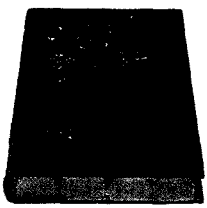

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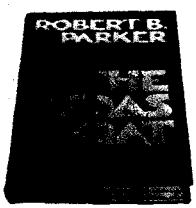

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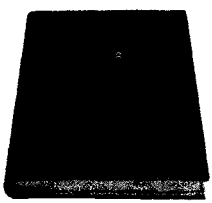

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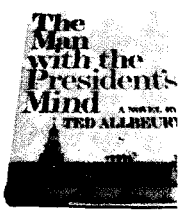

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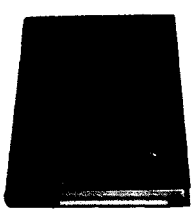

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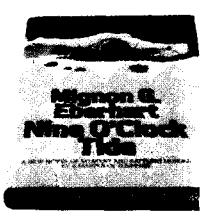

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